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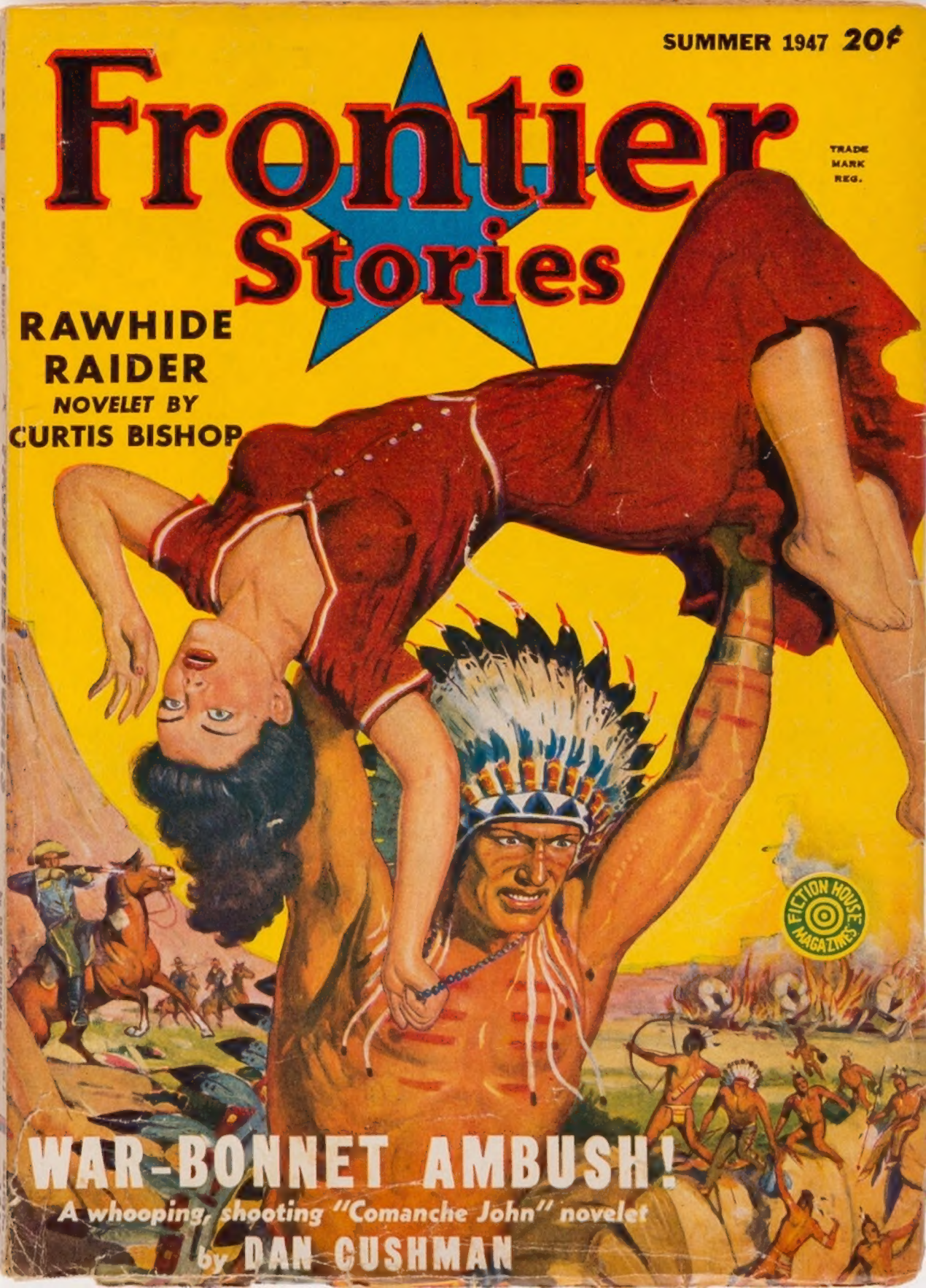
RAWHIDE RAIDER

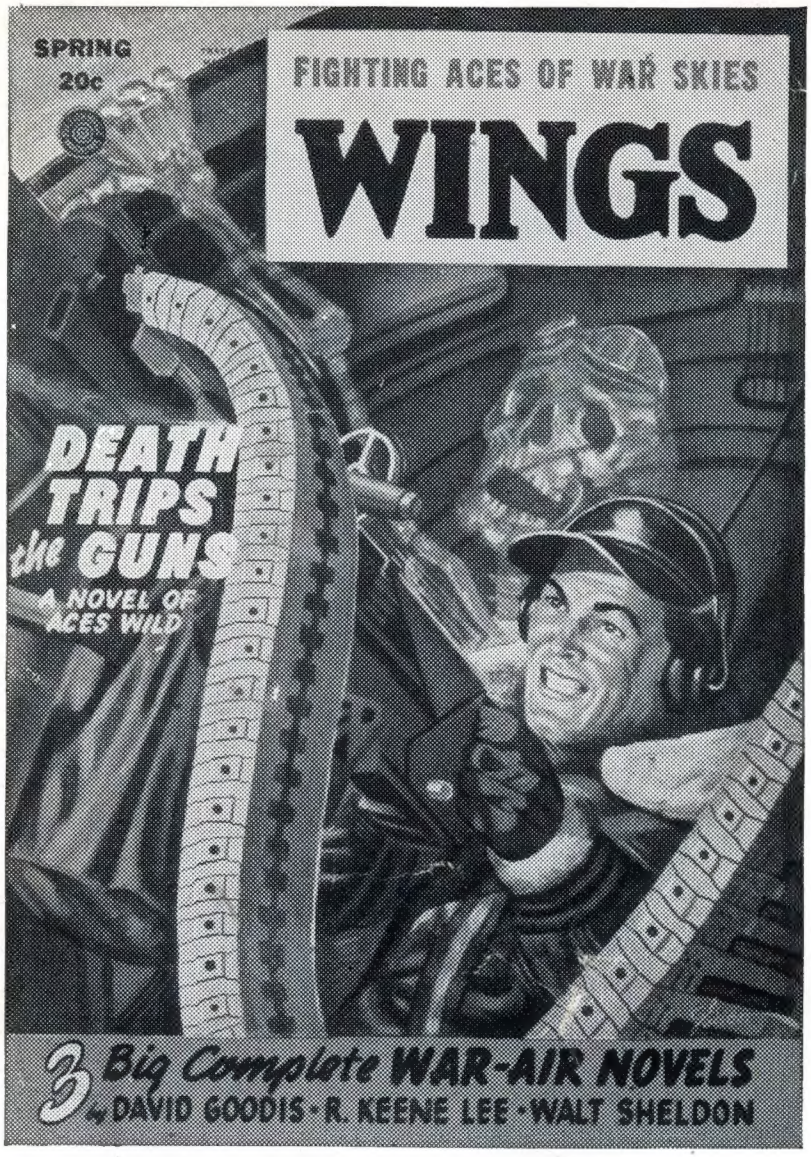
NOVELET BY CURTIS BISHOP



WAR-BONNET AMBUSH!

A whooping, shooting "Comanche John" novelet

by DAN CUSHMAN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Epic Novel of Texicans on the Trail

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B. VESTAL

There was screaming panic around them.

RAWHIDE RAIDER

By CURTIS BISHOP

JOHN CANNON stood off and surveyed the rawhide corral with satisfaction. It would hold the wild longhorn cattle even after they had been fed and watered, and had recovered from the fatigue and thirst of a two-day drive from the lower Neuces.

It was seven feet high, this corral. Heavy cedar posts had been set in a circular trench three feet deep, and then lashed together with strips of green cowhide. Inside, two hundred head of wild Texas cattle sniffed curiously at the barrier, but were in no mood to test its strength. They would be turned out along with the two thousand-odd semi-tame cattle which made up the Tall T outfit, and only a few of them would drift back into the wild brakes.

Two vaqueros were struggling with the heavy rawhide gate, finally pulling it shut and upright, and making the rawhide bonds secure.

"It'll hold," a voice said in John's ear.

John turned. Uncle Ike Sewall was right by him, sitting carelessly in his saddle despite his wooden leg.

"Didn't see you ride up, Uncle Ike," John said. "Yes, it'll hold."

"How many did you get?"

"I figger two hundred."

"Pretty danged good," grinned Uncle Ike. He was nearly seventy, but he rode a horse better with one leg than most men could with two, and there wasn't a man in the Neuces country who didn't show him a quick respect when "his temper was bilin' ". Uncle Ike did a quick mental calculation. "That means we can trail nearly three thousand head," he said.

Up the trail they thundered—three thousand raging Texas steers and a hell-for-leather crew, hard driven by roaring Big John Cannon and hot-headed Chase Mitchell, eyeing each other in deadly hate and goaded mercilessly on by the lovely Martha Bell!

"Worth six thousand in San Antone. Worth ten times that much in Kansas."

"More," John said. "Worth ninety thousand in Kansas."

"That's a heap of money," sighed Uncle Ike.

John waved his weary vaqueros to turn in. They were dogtired, all of them. For six days they had combed the brush of the lower Neuces, riding mostly by moonlight, luring wild steers into hastily-built but sturdy traps with decoy cattle. They had pushed their captive herd forty miles in two days to reach the Tall T headquarters and get their cattle in the master corral by sundown, Tall T hands who had been left behind took over the chore of feeding and watering the weary beasts.

John rode toward the house with Uncle Ike. Even this mile away, lights gleamed in the two-story house that had always been kept freshly painted, and flawlessly landscaped, until war had come and men had gone away. The two of them rode over once-plowed fields now grown up with blue stem and scraggling mesquite and furtive cacti.

"You won't like what you'll find, John," Uncle Ike said after a moment.

"No?" John tried to see his companion's face in the gloom of twilight. But Uncle Ike was looking the other way, spitting down-wind.

"Nope." Another hesitation. "Chase Mitchell came riding in yesterday," Uncle Ike said finally.

"The hell he did!" John exclaimed. Then, more calmly, "Where has he been all this time?"

"In prison camp. Claims it took him three years after the surrender to get out and back home."

JOHN'S lips tightened. He did not need to ask how Mitchell had been received. For eight years now, ever since '61, slim dark-haired Martha Bell had nourished the memory of Chase Mitchell. She had been only sixteen when Chase had ridden away, but love comes in a rush to a Texas woman, comes as fast as the quick-breaking spring, which is there in its green-ridged glory before any outfit can be possibly ready for it.

"Jest when we wuz getting along good," sighed Uncle Ike.

There wasn't much left of what had been Oak Grove. The house was there, and most of the furnishings. Uncle Ike had returned, but minus a leg, him who by all rights was too old to have gone gallivanting off with Hood. John Cannon had come back, the son of Bryan Bell's former overseer, who, like Bryan, had died in Virginia. Martha Bell had been waiting, with Aunt Lula older and crabbier than ever. The land had been there, but the rail fences were gone and the barns burned and the horses driven off.

But Martha Bell had been waiting, and that was all that mattered to John Cannon. That she was waiting for Chase Mitchell wasn't the end of his hope, as long as Chase did not return.

But now... Chase Mitchell was back!

Eight years was a long time. Perhaps Chase had lost the good looks, the easy grin, the gracefulness which had made Martha Bell worship him, and wait for him. Perhaps, after eight years, the old-time fascination was no longer there, and Martha Bell could compare Chase with John Cannon—tall, stooped John, not a handsome man but a steady one, not a romantic man but a practical one.

Then John had washed in the basin outside and was shaking hands with Chase Mitchell in the big living room, and he knew this hope had been premature. The spots of grey in Mitchell's temples did nothing to dispel the charm of his appearance and his manner. Chase was perhaps better looking than ever; there was an air of sadness about him, and a woman would warm to him quicker because here was a man who had suffered.

Particularly a woman like Martha Bell. The war was over and the sword buried in Appomatox courtyard. But Martha, and many other women, still remembered.

John Cannon noticed something else, Mitchell shook his hand warmly and said, "I heard about your fighting, John. You and Forrest gave 'em hell at Corinth."

John bobbed his head. He had forgotten about that. Corinth, Shiloh, Chickamauga, Franklin...why should a man want to remember? More pleasant to think about were the cattle in the rawhide corral, or the oats swaying in the bottom tract.

"And Martha tells me you've kept Oak Grove going," Chase continued. "Owe you my own personal thanks for that, John Cannon."

There it was—what John had feared. There was unconscious patronage in Chase Mitchell's manner. *You have done well, my good man. You are as good an overseer as your father ever was. You have labored mightily to rebuild Oak Grove. We, the landed gentry who are by birth a station above you, are not ungrateful. Now that I have returned, and Martha can marry one of her own kind, you will see the results of your efforts put to good use.*

"We call it the Tall T now," John said slowly. "It isn't a plantation anymore. It is a ranch. Or the makings of one."

"I know that," said Chase with a little laugh. "But for eight years, John, Oak Grove has been heaven to me. I've hummed myself to sleep with it at night. I can't call it the Tall T right off."

"Of course not," Martha said quickly from the doorway. She had tall glasses in a silver tray that was a century old. "Mint juleps, Chase," she smiled.

John declined. He could take Bourbon straight, but not this way. Uncle Ike hobbled in and quickly accepted. John watched to see what Uncle Ike would do about his chew of tobacco. The one-legged old man just shifted his cud to the other cheek and drank his julep unaffected.

Aunt Lula, favoring her left leg, likewise took a julep. Aunt Lula made the toast—to Chase. John watched the shadows from the swaying curtains lift and fall on Martha's face. It was a beautiful face. Yet John saw clearly the markings of these last long years. There was sternness in her mouth, and determination in her eyes. The wispish hair playing about her ears was uncurled, and the pink dress, though freshly starched and ironed, had not been taken up to cover her loss of weight.

There was a clatter of hoofprints outside before they had finished. Martha made a little motion with her hands.

"Oh, dear! That's Mr. Simpson, isn't it? Look and see, Aunt Lula."

John's lips quirked. Not since '61 had Martha Bell employed a woman's coquettry. But, not since '61, had there been a Chase Mitchell around.

"Yes, it's Mr. Simpson," Aunt Lula confirmed from the window.

"What does that damned carpetbagger want?" growled Uncle Ike.

"You'll have to get out," Martha said to them, not answering Ike's question. "I asked Mr. Simpson over. Hurry now. I'll explain later."

Aunt Lula shooed them into the kitchen as they hung back. "Who is this Simpson-" Chase demanded of John. Cannon's lips twitched. "He's the carpetbagger who took over your dad's place," John finally answered.

Chase nodded. "I knew it went for taxes," he said calmly. "I got word of that."

JOHN and Ike sat at the kitchen table it Chase Mitchell walked back and forth. "Any idea what he wants with Martha?" he snapped.

"No," John said curtly.

Aunt Lula limped in and sat across from John. "I can tell you," she said with a smile of triumph. "She's going to borrow money from him."

"Borrow!" exclaimed John. "Why?"

"Martha," Aunt Lula said evasively, "has her plans."

John's glance leaped to Uncle Ike. "Don't look at me," protested the one-legged man. "I ain't the big chief of this wigwam."

"That's the way the Hornsby's lost their place," John said slowly. "They borrowed from Simpson. He took over the Mitchell plantation when it went for taxes. Remember? We had two thousand hard cash. But it was sold before Martha got to the courthouse. Claimed a mistake in the notice. Simpson got it for practically nothing. Does he get this place, too? That will make him king pin of the Neuces valley."

"Martha knows what she is doing," Aunt Lula said frostily. There it was again. *Remember your place, young man! Your job is to ride into the cane brakes and lasso wild cattle and drive them back here and slap a Tall T brand upon them. You work hard, young man. Because you do you can sit at our table and even come into our parlor and drink in the company of our guests, like Chase Mitchell.*

Uncle Ike stirred. "John is foreman," protested the old man. "What little we got we owe to him. Seems to me the foreman oughta know about what's going on."

John was conscious of Chase Mitchell's look. He would have given a pretty penny to know what was behind that glance. What was Mitchell thinking about him?

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's Martha's land," he said carelessly. "I just run

cattle." He stood up. "I think I'll turn in."

Aunt Lula turned to Chase. "You'll have to sleep in the bunkhouse with the boys tonight, Chase," she explained. "Mr. Simpson will probably spend the night. Martha doesn't want him to know you're back—yet."

"I see," Chase said slowly. He added. "Got a bunk for me, Cannon?"

He asked it a little curtly. *I must sleep with the hired hands tonight, Cannon. My hostess says so. I don't mind so much. In eight years of war, and prison, I've slept where I could, and was grateful for whatever there was. Can you fix me a bed?*

"Come on," John said curtly. "We have plenty of room."

Chase followed him out of the back door and into the night.

II

BREAKFAST was early in the Tall T bunkhouse. Ramsey, the negro cook, served Chase Mitchell with his own hands. "Lawsy, Mistuh Chase, it's scrumptious to see you back," beamed the darkey.

"Thank you, Ramsey," Chase said. *He wasn't one of the riders, though by circumstance he ate with them. Ramsey knew it. Ramsey fluttered over him. Ramsey knew class when he saw it.*

Uncle Ike hobbled in before they had finished. "Miss High-and-Mighty says for you to stay outa sight," he informed Chase. "Get a hoss and ride out with the boys. If that damned Simpson comes around, pull your hat low and act like a vaquero."

Chase nodded.

"Any orders for me?" John asked grimly. He was surprised at the way he felt. He had never come closer to not giving a damn in his life. He knew there were orders by the way Uncle Ike didn't want to meet his eyes. And he wasn't sure, even before he knew what they were, that he would carry them out.

"The Queen wants all our stuff rounded up," Ike said crossly. "That damned scalawag doesn't believe we have nearly three thousand head on the place. Martha says to round 'em up in the south pasture."

John hesitated. It was on the tip of his tongue to send back a scalding message to Martha Bell. Then he checked himself and shrugged his shoulder. Now he had an entirely different feeling. Now it seemed as if a weight had suddenly fallen off his shoulders.

She was willing to throw away what he had labored for since '65. She was going to borrow money against the ranch and the stock from Gordon Simpson, a carpetbagger whose dishonesty was as plain as the nose on his face. John couldn't cross her. He had no power of veto over her, nor even the right of protestation. He was only a foreman, and a foreman to Martha Bell and her kind rated no higher than an overseer.

"Sure," he said with a grin. "We'll round 'em up. Simpson can have a look at 'em."

He turned to Chase. "Wanna help, Mitchell?" he asked gruffly.

"I'd better not," Chase answered. "It seems to be part of the game that I stay hidden."

Chase arose from the breakfast table. Again John was conscious of Mitchell's studying look. He waited a moment, but Chase had nothing to say. John ordered all of the vaqueros into the saddle.

The Tall T had more riders than the usual Neuces outfit. There were two full crews, for one gang worked the lower Neuces country while the other worked the home range closely. There had been only a handful of cattle when John Cannon and Felipe Vega had started their branding three years before. Now there were nearly three thousand. As many had been sold to pay off taxes. Since the Oak Grove plantation had never owned much live stock before the war, it was obvious that these steers had come from many and sundry sources. Martha Bell herself did not know where John Cannon and her riders had picked them up.

But none of them had been acquired dishonestly. The lower Neuces country had been left unpopulated by the Mexican War. Ruthless American troops had driven Mexican families out of the country that was United States soil by right of conquest. Many of them had left their cattle behind in flight. There were wild steers in the lower Neuces canebrakes for any brushpopper who wanted them badly enough. They could be trapped by moonlight. Cap-

turing a wild deer was tame work in comparison.

John recalled these brush-popping expeditions as he started his twelve riders fanning out in a circle. He had been charged himself by wild-eyed steer fleet enough to run down a horse, and savage enough to gore a man. These three thousand cattle represented two years of torturous, dangerous work. Three vaqueros had been killed in that time.

But Martha Bell could mortgage the steers to Gordon Simpson without a moment's qualm, without consulting her foreman. Of course the Tall T needed cash. There wasn't enough Yankee money in Texas to go around if it had been fairly distributed, if men like Simpson had not utilized their political control of a ravaged state to corner far more than their share.

But there would be no cattle to replace these, John Cannon told himself grimly; at least, he wouldn't get them. He would tell Miss Bell so when the opportunity arose. Someone else could comb the canebrakes. Someone else could rush pell mell into a restless wild herd, risking life and limb.

SIMPSON rode out with Martha on the second day. The fan-shaped dragnet of sweating riders was pushing the cattle toward the river, now having to fight off bolting animals as the disturbed beasts resented this interruption of their grazing. John gave the carpetbagger only a nod.

Simpson was a handsome man in a dark, self-confident way. John Cannon, who knew men, realized this was no weak character, no more scavenger than most of the Yankees settling in Texas seemed to be. Simpson, John had heard, had been imprisoned by the Confederates, and had come to Texas in '64, running contraband supplies to Matamoras before the surrender, building up the stake which had enabled him to buy property along the Neuces and to bribe what county and state law there was.

"I believe, Miss Bell, you do have three thousand cattle," Simpson said to Martha. He had a smooth voice and John, looking up, noticed the boldness of his eyes as he looked at Martha. Cannon had heard that about this carpetbagger, too, that Simpson was inclined to shrug his shoulders at southern prejudices, and to make his play for a pretty woman's attention as if the war had never happened and the inevitable hate was only a temporary emotion.

"How many are there, Cannon?" Simpson asked brusquely.

John turned. He could not ignore a direct question. "I'd say about twenty-nine hundred," he drawled. "Some got through our dragnet."

Simpson seemed to be studying him with speculative eyes. Again John was conscious that here was not a cringing man, nor a foolish man. Simpson was wringing this country dry, yes. Simpson was smart enough to see an opportunity, and to make the most of his chances. But war had changed plenty of men's notions about what was entirely right and what was utterly wrong.

"I'll talk to you later, Cannon," Simpson said.

The Yankee rode off with Martha. John watched them take the valley trail along the river, riding close to each other. He saw Martha lift her head as if laughing at something Simpson had said. He sighed. Predicting a woman was like foreseeing the Texas weather in February or March. For a long time Martha had scorned such men as Simpson. She had swung her quirt at one of Simpson's partners in the streets of Tilden when the man had done no more than tip his hat. But this was not the first time she had ridden with Gordon Simpson. And yet, of all carpetbaggers, Simpson should be her pet hate. It was Simpson who had taken the Mitchell plantation across the river, who had rebuilt the house where Chase Mitchell had been born.

But there was work to do, and John brooded no more about the strangeness of Martha Bell's character. The cattle were milling in the flat by sundown. Gordon Simpson accepted their estimate of two thousand and nine hundred head, and in the library where Bryan Bell had figured his accounts and read books about the Revolutionary War, Martha Bell signed a "demand" mortgage.

John, called in to make an estimate as to the acres they owned, overheard their dispute over the time limit. Gordon Simpson was firm in his refusal to allow no definite time. The loan, ten thousand dol-

lars in gold, would be payable upon demand with eight per cent.

"You deal hard, Mr. Simpson," Martha Bell sighed as she signed.

"Yes, my dear," Gordon Simpson agreed. "I'm that type of a man. When I sight something I want, nothing stands in my way. Nothing."

John sensed the unspoken implication. Gordon Simpson wanted more than the Tall T cattle and the Tall T grass. He wanted the Tall T's owner. John bitterly wondered if that wouldn't be the fate Martha Bell deserved. A man like Gordon Simpson would take her and break her instead of yielding to her queenly authority.

Outside, just before mounting his horse, Gordon Simpson motioned to John Cannon. "A word with you, Cannon," he said crisply. He had been an officer in the Northern army; he was the type of man who would always be a leader.

"Yes?"

"You're a cattleman," Simpson stated. He did not intend to be complimentary. He was not fawning. He was looking at a man man-to-man and stating a fact he had just learned. "The Tall T may come to me, Cannon. I'm not denying that it's in the back of my mind. When it does, you're my man. Before then, if you like. I own three other spreads. I'm getting a herd ready to go up the trail. I can pay you money."

John hesitated. "I need a man like you," the carpetbagger went on in his low flat voice. "I'd even make you a partner in my cattle business."

"Reckon not," John drawled.

Simpson's lips twitched. "Think it over," he said with a mirthless smile. "I know, Cannon, I fought in a different Army. That doesn't mean a damn thing to me. Why should it to you?"

"It doesn't," John heard himself saying. "What I got against you is deeper than that, Simpson."

Again Simpson nodded, and almost smiled. "I know," he agreed. "I'm a damned scoundrel, Cannon."

"Something like that," John agreed. "I'd use a different expression."

"It takes a scoundrel to operate in times like these," Simpson said harshly. "I'm just a smart one, that's all. I'm no fool, Cannon." He hesitated. "There may be those who think I can be taken in by a change of front," he murmured. "I was a little shocked when Miss Bell approached me with a request for a loan. It may be that Miss Bell—or someone—has ideas I can be played for a sucker. If there are any such notions, you might suggest they have picked out the wrong man."

"I wasn't asked about the loan," John answered slowly. "I don't know what the play is myself. Whatever it is, I don't like it."

"I'm watching it," Simpson promised. He nodded again. "Don't leave the country without giving me a chance, Cannon. I need a man like you. Mebbe we can get together."

JOHN did not reply. He rode back to the house in moody silence. Inside Chase Mitchell was drinking a julep. Martha Bell sat in one of the faded overstuffed chairs, and again John noticed how tight her smile was of late, and how nervous she was, jumping up as he came into the room.

"John, I wanted to see you," she said. "We need at least another hundred head. Can you take the boys into the lower country tomorrow?"

"We're pretty near cleaned up around the Neuces," John said slowly. "I heard talk there were some steers over in the Duval flats. We'll try there."

"Good," she nodded. She didn't care where the steers came from, hell or China. *Just bring them in, my good man. Add them to the growing Tall T herd that will be Chase Mitchell's when he and I walk down the aisle.* "Have a drink, John," she invited. *You've worked hard, my good man. You're entitled to a drink in the same room with Chase Mitchell.*

"No," John snapped, turning on his heel and stalking toward the bunkhouse.

Before sunup he and five men were already riding down the Neuces trail, crossing the narrow winding timber valley, thrashing through the thick hollow grass of the Duval country. Here brush-popping had to be done altogether by night. A wild steer in this open country was as fast as a horse.

Four days later, with only seventy head, John decided they had had enough. It took another three days to push the bawling

cattle back to the Tall T. They reached headquarters in mid-afternoon and John, galloping ahead to see if the main corral was ready, saw the new wagons with one quick understanding glance. In the cedar-pole corral were new horses, at least a dozen head. Chase Mitchell rode out from the barn and John turned to meet him.

"There seems to be some preparations here," John said slowly.

For the first time John saw how Chase sat in the saddle, limp, hunched forward a little, now swinging a leg over his saddle horn. He realized it was the first time he had seen Mitchell on a horse since 1861.

"That's right, Cannon," Chase murmured. John fidgeted under his calm steady look. "Miss Bell should tell you," Chase went on, "but she's in town buying things. We're taking the trail, Cannon. Day after tomorrow morning."

"Are we?" John asked grimly.

He whirled his horse around and rode back to his herd now pushing over the last ridge. So the wagons and the extra remuda had been bought and Martha was in town buying a few things before they took the trail! That was why she had sent him back into the brush, to get him out of the way while they pushed forward their plans. Well, he would not interfere. The Tall T was not his. Not even these rebellious wild cattle were his.

MARTHA drove up in the rig while they were prodding the hungry, thirsty cattle into the corral. John ignored her grimly, though there were enough men that he didn't have to haul feed himself. It was after dark when he was finished. He noticed that she was still waiting for him.

"John," she called when he started toward the bunkhouse without speaking.

"Yes, Miss Bell?"

She was silent a moment before the curtness of his answer. "Chase told me you noticed the wagons—and things," she said faintly. "We're going up the trail, John."

"It's a little early," John said stiffly. "We will be sure to catch the Red on a rise." Then he shrugged his shoulders. "However, the earlier you get to Kansas, the higher cattle sell for."

He started on. She reached out from the rig and caught his bridle. "You don't understand, John. We're all going. We're not coming back. We're going on to Wyoming."

There was no use pretending that he was not shocked. They had talked over the trail drive, and John had anticipated taking a herd to Kansas this summer, their first. But pulling out lock, stock and barrel! Leaving the Tall T range and the big white house where two generations had lived, and died!

"Is that Mitchell's idea?" he demanded.

"No," she replied. He saw the red spot in each of her cheeks and he was glad that some of the pinched hardness had left her face, and that she could look like a girl again, even if it took the mention of Chase's name to do it. "It's all my doing, John."

He looked down upon her in sudden understanding. "So that's why you borrowed ten grand from Gordon Simpson?" he demanded. "You're leaving him holding the sack—an empty ranch?"

"Yes," she admitted.

The gleam in John Cannon's eyes wasn't a pleasant one. "You roped him in," he said slowly. "You played up to him. You even let him think you could fall for him, and him a carpetbagger. You led him on, and all you ever wanted from him was a loan you never aimed to pay back."

Martha Bell squared back her shoulders before the accusation of his tone. "I'm a woman, John," she said defiantly. "You're a man and you can shoot and ride. I'm only a woman, and I have to use the weapons I have."

"Yeah," John drawled. "A rattlesnake offers the same excuse."

"John Cannon, you forget!" she snapped, eyes flashing.

"Sure I do," he broke in. "I forget how tired and hungry I am. Mebbe when I eat I'll see things your way. Sure I will. Gordon Simpson had just been a fool a few months. I've been one for years."

"John Cannon, if you ever—!"

But John was riding away from her, slouched wearily forward in the saddle. At the barn he rubbed down his own horse. It was pitch dark when he reached the bunkhouse. Supper had already been eaten and the cook was snoring. John was fixing a cold sandwich when Chase Mitchell came in.

"Miss Bell is fixing you supper in the house," Chase told him.

John grinned. *You're tired, my good man. Tonight you can come into the kitchen and I'll fix you a meal with my own hands.*

"I'm finding enough out here," he drawled.

He finished fixing his cold meat sandwich. He sat on a stool and consumed it in three bites. He stood up to fix another. Chase Mitchell was still looking at him.

"Well?" John asked.

Something akin to a smile curved Chase's mouth. "I'll present your regrets to Miss Bell," Chase Mitchell murmured.

III

JOHN CANNON WAS AWAKE with the first scraping of feet in the bunkhouse, but he did not throw off his blankets and grope for his boots. Instead, he sat up in his bunk and rolled a smoke. He was smoking slowly, and in obvious enjoyment, when Limpy Callahan, the cook, called "come and get it!" John still didn't stir. The rest of the hands gulped their ham and eggs and shuffled outside. The Tall T had good vaqueros. No foreman needed to drive them to their morning chores.

Limpy came to John's bunk. "Air you sick, John? Want me to fix you something special?"

"I'll eat after awhile," John said. "Keep the coffee hot."

Pecos Rutledge came in to tell him Miss Bell wanted to talk to him.

"Tell her I'll see her later," John answered.

In a moment there was Martha's voice outside. "John, John Cannon!"

"Yep," he sung back.

"Come out, John. Please. Chase and I must talk to you."

"I ain't up yet," John answered.

"But it's nine o'clock."

"Can't prove it from here," John returned. "My watch ain't running."

"Then I'm coming in," Martha proposed. "I must talk to you."

John pushed the lower half of his long frame under a blanket and looked up at her with owlish eyes. "What's so danged important?" he demanded.

"Plenty to do, John," she said crisply. "Gordon Simpson has gone to San Antonio for a few days. We must pull out while he's gone."

"Bueno," John nodded. "Get going. Simpson talked once about a deal with me. Mebbe I'll hang around and work for him."

"John Cannon!" exclaimed Martha. "You're not going with us!"

"Not figgering on it," John drawled. He was amazed at his own attitude. He reached over to roll another smoke, the upper half of him naked, and it actually amused him that she should blush.

Then, of a sudden, Martha Bell laid her head on the foot of his bunk and cried.

"John, you can't desert me!" she whimpered. "This means everything to me. I have ten thousand dollars in cash. We can sell the herd in Kansas. We'll have enough money to start out right in Wyoming. Buy new fresh grass. Build a nice home. We'll leave Texas, and all these bitter memories behind us."

He could look at her coldly, could speak to her reprovingly . . . him, John Cannon, the son of an overseer, then a foreman!

"Seems to me that's Simpson's money," he pointed out.

"I mean it for Chase," Martha Bell said through her sobs. "I know, it was horrid of me to get it. To lead him on as you said. But Simpson robbed Chase, John. While he was in prison. Simpson bought in the Mitchell place before Chase came back. You know it was crooked. You said so yourself."

"Yes," John agreed, "it was crooked. Simpson ain't the man Diogenes was looking for."

"I waited so long for him, John," went on Martha in that same piteous tone. "While all of you were gone, John, it was horrible. Lonely and bitter and heartbreaking. Dad was killed. Then Chase was captured and our cattle driven off. No one to feed us. We had to eat turnips and cabbages and boil out the dirt floor of our smokehouse to get salt. Then you got back. I would have died if it hadn't been for you, John. Right off you gave me a hope. The world we knew was dead, but you could build another. With wild cattle. Trail drives. I saw you make it work, John. Then I begun to hope that Chase would come back, too. He did come. And, away from

here, where there are no Simpsons, no carpetbaggers, we can start over. But you've got to go, John. At least get us there. Then ride on if you wish. God knows you've done enough for me as it is. The most you've done is to keep me praying—for this day."

John Cannon crushed out his cigarette. "All right," he agreed. "I'll get you to the trail. To Kansas. That's my contract. From then on . . . it's you and Chase on your own."

Martha's eyes flashed a look of gratitude. Then she studied him from under half-closed lids.

"You were hoping Chase didn't come back, weren't you, John?" she asked softly.

John took a deep breath. There was an almost miraculous change in him. He could talk to her calmly about how he had felt, with no embarrassment, with no sense of presumption.

"I'm glad he came back," John heard himself say calmly. "Chase is the man for you to ride the river with."

She studied him again. "I'm proud to hear you say that, John," she said softly.

But something told him she was disappointed that he could dismiss these years of blind devotion so lightly. That was the woman of her. For years she could wait for Chase Mitchell, but she could play him and Gordon Simpson or any other man who could help her along in her savage, driving ambition—to again be someone of importance, to again know luxury, and to again crush under her tiny heels those who were unfortunate enough to love her, and work for her.

"Bueno," John grinned. "I'll get you to Kansas."

She looked at him reprovingly. "I don't like you when you're this way, John."

"Better get out," he suggested, "and let me dress."

She fled with another blush.

JOHN ate hurriedly and then plunged into the work of getting the herd ready to move. The seventy wild steers just brought from the Duval had to be branded first. The wagons were ready, three of them. One for the cook's galley—a huge wagon with sideboards five feet high before the canvas top began. Four mules would pull it. The interior was like a cavern, piled with barrels of flour and sugar, burlap bags of coffee, kegs and boxes and big round tins. There was hardly room for the bedrolls which this wagon would carry also.

Another wagon was piled high with furniture, personal effects and extra equipment, saddles and rifles. In the third Martha Bell and Aunt Lula would ride and live. Bunks had been built on one side. A dresser was bolted to the opposite side.

John noticed the canvas water tank under the light wagon. As he was inspecting it, Squinty Hogan came up.

"That's a new wrinkle to me," said Squinty. "This fella Mitchell dreamed it up."

"It's bueno," John agreed curtly. He did not like some of the authority Chase was taking quietly. But he could not protest. Half of this, wagons and herd alike, was Chase's. She had built it up against the day Mitchell would return from prison.

Mitchell came walking out from the house, motioning that he wanted to see John. Cannon waited. Chase walked with a slight slouch, not the walk of a cavalryman. John could remember their boyhood; the countryside had been proud of Chase's riding. But the Mitchell thoroughbred had been a different horse from the mustang-quarter-horse crossbreed the Tall T owned. Many good cavalrymen could not sit a mustang. A cowhorse would not pace. But Chase rode as well as any of them. And Chase walked toward John with the gait of a man who had ridden mustangs all of his life.

"About the route, Cannon," Chase said in his cool voice. "We have three days before Simpson gets back. That will get us past the Colorado if we go like hell. We couldn't possibly go on to Fort Worth without him overtaking us. I thought . . . Miss Bell and I thought, that is . . . we would risk the Staked Plains route."

John frowned. Few outfits had gone up the trail from the Neuces country. Later there was to be a rush, until there was a beaten path over a mile wide stretching from South Texas to the Indian Territory border, and beyond.

There was talk of trails, yes; there was talk everywhere. John Cannon, who had never ridden beyond the limits of his Neuces country except to war, knew the

Chisholm route from listening to tales of herds already up, and riders already back. Wherever cattlemen met the first question was, "Going up this Spring?" and then, "What trail will you take?"

Most of the Neuces men were not seriously considering the Staked Plains route, though before the war a few courageous trail bosses had pushed across the Texas desert to markets in northern New Mexico and Colorado. One herd had even gone out to California. But it was a hard route. They were afraid of water.

"You mean Colonel McKitrick's route?" John said.

Colonel McKitrick had led a scouting party through the Staked Plains. Reports said he had plainly marked out a trail that could be followed.

"Yes," Chase nodded. "We can start to Austin. North of there we'll turn off at the San Gabriel."

"That's too far west," John objected. This was all hearsay to him, but for three years he had mulled over the idea. And he had served in the Army with a rider who had been up twice through the Ozarks.

"Some follow it," Chase said. "Surer water. We can dip further west along the San Gabriel. We won't leave a trail. Simpson will chase us straight north. Then he'll wait at Doan's crossing."

The handsome man shrugged his shoulders. "We'll worry about Doan's Crossing when we get there," he said grimly.

John hesitated. Somehow he didn't have the same attitude of resentment toward Chase as toward Martha. Mitchell was a leader of men, no doubt about it. John's eyes dropped as he thought a moment. When he raised them again, he noticed that Chase Mitchell was wearing two six-guns. John did not know why he should remark to himself upon that. It did not take a man long in this country to acquire the gun habit. But somehow it amused John. Mitchell should be carrying silver-mounted dueling pistols instead of serviceable pearl-handled Colt revolvers.

"Bueno with me," he nodded.

"You'll give the orders to the men?"

"Why not tell 'em yourself?" John countered.

"You're foreman," Chase answered. "They wouldn't take orders from me anyhow."

No, they wouldn't, John conceded. They were good men, even the Mexican vequeros. Other outfits hired new riders for trail drives; the Tall T couldn't do better than its own corps.

BY DARK their preparations were finished. Martha Bell wanted to sleep in their wagon. "I never want to see the house again," she said with a catch in her throat.

It was hard for John not to be sympathetic at that moment. Aunt Lula said it was a fool notion but consented. Limpy built his fire outside, and slept beneath the chuck wagon. The cook was a queer galoot, John thought. Limpy was more excited than any of the riders about the trail ahead. Yet a drive meant nothing for a cook except extra work and hardship, few thrills and practically no dangers.

A handful of the boys gathered around Limpy as he put his brown beans on to boil, a huge pot of them. "You'll never run out of red beans when Limpy is around," promised the deformed cook. "Mebbe I ain't the best cook in the world . . . in a bunkhouse. But get out on a trail . . . man alive, I'll feed you lazy varmints until you're as fat as a speckled heifer."

Martha Bell came down to the fire for camp coffee. John heard her say to Chase as she started back to her wagon, "Not tonight, Chase; I'm sleepy." But John doubted if she slept the whole night long.

None of them slept well. They talked late and it seemed as if their eyes had been closed only a few moments when Limpy's alarm clock, set on the bottom of an overturned tin pan for more noise, clattered and bounced and fell off into the dirt. It was still dark. Limpy stirred up the fire and hung the two-gallon coffee pot on its tripod, poured in a pound of home-ground coffee, lifted the lid of a Dutch oven in which beans had simmered all night, and shouted to the wrangler to stir his lazy stumps. All of the hands rolled out of their blankets, grinning, fresh, eager. Every other morning thereafter the camp would awake slowly, moody and silent. Every other morning would come with an unbelievable rush, marking just another day incredibly long, but this was the first day, and the day many of them had waited for a long time.

John Cannon did not echo their enthusiasm. He realized, with a grim smile as he cooled his coffee, he had waited for this day, too. But not as it was. He had not waited for Chase Mitchell who came to the fire with a crisp "good morning" and who sat on his haunches drinking his coffee while Limpy dished out big flat dough cakes which the men wrapped around a helping of beans and ate tortilla fashion.

Off in the east the first lonely gray of dawn was spreading upward, lifting like a thick blanket. The black pool of three thousand longhorns was stirring, held from motion by the last guard of the night. The men ate on.

"Don't wait on me, you spalpeens," sang out Limpy. "If you're waiting on me, you're just wasting time."

One of the younger hands yelped. "Let's take off like a sage hen," he proposed eagerly.

In an hour the herd was in motion. The cattle were easy to start; John remembered what he had heard from other trail bosses and set them off at a fast pace. This would be a hard day for them. They were jittery and rebellious. In a day or two their natural leaders would show up, and the other steers would be reconciled to plodding along in their wake.

John took the lead. The Tall T boys had never herded north before, but they were well-organized; a dozen times they had driven cattle up from the Neuces canebrakes.

Within an hour's time Chase Mitchell galloped up beside him. "Mind if I keep you company?" Chase asked.

"Reckon not," John agreed, though he wasn't anxious for any kind of companionship.

"I've come from Miss Bell's wagon," Chase volunteered after a moment. "She doesn't want to see anyone."

"How's she feeling?" John asked.

"She's crying," Mitchell said grimly.

He pulled up his horse and looked back. John also turned. John saw Chase Mitchell pull his slouch hat low over his eyes. "I feel like crying myself, Cannon," said the dark-faced man.

John Cannon nodded. But he didn't cry. He slouched lower in the saddle and kept his eyes doggedly ahead.

IV

THIS WAS A TRAIL used more by horse thieves than by cattlemen. U. S. Army troops had blazed the path across the Staked Plains for cattle herds to follow, but it was ingenious gangs of horse thieves who took advantage of their discovery. Horses stolen in Texas were run to New Mexico and exchanged for animals pilfered there. Thus a stolen horse never showed up in the same state where it was taken.

John Cannon found the military rock piles without difficulty. Coronado had named this the *Llano Estacado,* and that night when Squinty moaned that it was an awful country to cross, John said, "Those Spaniards made it. I reckon we can."

"It's been made before, plenty of times," Chase Mitchell added.

Chase had no assignment with the herd, except for guard duty. John and Pecos rode the points, with Charley Tucker bossing the drags. A black muley steer led the herd, which now was reconciled to the day-long marches. This was not culled stock and the drags fell back clear to the wagons, keeping Tucker and his two helpers working like beavers.

They crossed the dry *cienagas* that John had heard about—two ribbons of spiked salt grass growing beside a narrow channel of sand. The white surface looked hard, but it gave underneath their weight. All riders raced back and forth across this sand, leading spare mounts behind them. Under their pounding the white strip darkened and moved in long running waves. Cups dug by the horses' hoofs began to fill. Little pools rose and ran together. Then the herd was splashing in a shallow stream.

Day by day, crawling northward, John felt the desolate hush of this land put its silence on both the herd and the men. It was a lonely country, too big, without a familiar mark. As yet nothing had happened to break the even tenor of their days and nights. The *cienagas* had yielded enough water. They had no evidence of pursuit behind them from Gordon Simpson or any other man. No more cattle had been killed for lameness than was necessary to keep them in fresh meat.

It was imagination, John tried to tell

himself. It was the size of this country, and its loneliness. A man could not find security until the *Llano Estacado* was crossed. At nights John was fidgety and difficult to talk to. He noticed the other men were the same, and Chase Mitchell more morose than any. Chase had one of the late tricks and his companions on the watch always rolled in their blankets early, grabbing what sleep they could before they were prodded awake and sent out to nod in their saddles. Every man grabbed every moment he could for sleep —except Mitchell.

John stood an early watch but always arose at midnight, when the guard was changed, to see about the herd. He became as attuned to this midnight rising as the herd itself. There was only the silent wheeling of the Big Dipper's handle to mark twelve midnight for the steers; no sound to break their sleep. Yet in some common impulse every animal arose, stretched, yawned, shifted a little, and then, if all was well, lay down again to rest until dawn.

Cannon rode out with the fresh guard, satisfied himself all was well, then rode back to camp and stretched out again. Several times he noticed Chase Mitchell up.

Martha Bell and Aunt Lula were as sleepless. Uncle Ike, fuming at his job of helping the wrangler, swore they weren't getting enough rest to keep a chigger going. Martha grew thinner, and the shadows under her eyes darkened. When John returned from his midnight inspection, she came to the fire to drink coffee with him, still in her dress, a shawl over her shoulders.

"It's empty, isn't it, John?" she asked.

"This country? Sure."

He studied her wan face. "Wyoming will be as bad," he added. "More mountains. More water. But it's new country."

Martha sighed. "It seemed so easy—back in Tilden. We could just fold up and move. We could leave everything behind."

"Like Gordon Simpson?" John asked. "We'll hear from him again, Martha."

"Do you think so?" she asked anxiously.

"You underrated Simpson," Cannon said grimly. "He's a carpetbagger, but not a scavenger. Still have that ten thousand?"

"In my wagon."

John rolled in his blankets with a grunt. She returned to her wagon with slow steps. John heard a stirring near him and then Chase Mitchell going to the wagon. "I'm worried, Chase," he heard Martha say. "That's all right, honey," Chase answered. "I'll take care of you."

John grinned to himself as he closed his eyes. Perhaps he shouldn't have stirred up Martha about Gordon Simpson. But he could look upon Martha Bell with a strange coldness these days. She had wanted something bad enough to make her play. "If there's trouble with Simpson," he said to himself, "I'm staying clear. I'm just a foreman. I just handle cattle. Let Mitchell handle Simpson. Let Mitchell handle the Wyoming ranch purchase, and the drive on from Kansas." Two weeks before he would have thought that ridiculous. The idea of handsome Chase Mitchell handling anything except a hunter and a glass of bourbon!

IT SEEMED he had just closed his eyes when there was a violent shaking of the earth, and then a jagged streak of lightning that lit up the entire plain with the brilliance of day. John rolled to his feet with a curse. The next instant an unseen hand struck the campfire, scattering its red coals outward for a hundred feet. The wagon canvasses bellied and slapped the bows like pistol shots.

And, with a roar, the wind swept down upon them, hurling particles of dust and sand into their faces with almost the force of buckshot!

John yelled, "Every man out!" He was in the saddle first, galloping around the herd. He expected any moment to hear the dreaded rumble, like thunder, of three thousand animals on the run. He circled the restless steers and knew that only the lack of a leader kept them from bolting. Behind came three riders, dim shapes in the dark. One of them called and John knew it was Mitchell. Then Chase was singing at the top of his voice.

John followed suit. The wind whipped the words out of their lips, but the singing seemed to ease the steers. The herd milled slowly, not frightened, but only restless. The north wind was cold upon them, and on the men who rode behind them.

"Fall out for coffee when you need it,"

John shouted. "No telling how long this may last."

One by one they rode in for coffee and breakfast. John intended to be the last to go. It seemed to him a foreman had to show on a night like this what he was made of.

But, near dawn, John rode hunched and shivering into camp, drained several cups of hot coffee without bothering to sweeten and blow it. He had changed his horse every two hours, and other riders kept fresh mounts under them.

As the dawn came in, eerie-pale and cold, John feared the worst. The wind was still rising, now so hard that his horse was unsteady beneath him. The strange unearthly light was showing up some of the cattle. Their low-moaning complaint had gone on for hours.

Lightning flashed off their horns and John wondered at their holding back. Now, with daylight, they were moving, without being started. They were turning downwind. John called every rider to the south point in an effort to keep them moving directly south. They couldn't be turned back into the wind; perhaps they couldn't even be veered.

No rain came. Rain might have eased the tension; at least would have stilled the lightning. Instead there was wind and dust, and John's throat was raw as he hurriedly drank coffee and changed horses. Martha Bell was helping Limpy at the campfire. Her face was pale and, as always when worried, her features drawn up into a tight-pinched knot.

The dust grew thicker. The herd was drifting now at a fast walk, not bolting, but ready to. There was nothing to do but try and hold the steers back, try and turn the leaders eastward whenever an opening came in the ranks of bobbing backs. The sun was screened above them by the rust-brown layer of blowing sand, but the heat was there, and the thirst was more intense because of the dust in their mouths. Above the rumble of their walk the open-mouthed groaning rose to a sharper key.

Every man knew the danger. To keep the steers turned ever so little, to keep the herd in check as much as possible, they had to ride directly in their path should a stampede come.

John watched the wind anxiously as afternoon came with no change in the sky above them. These were miles they would have to cover again. And water would soon became a life and death matter for horses as well as steers. Water lay to the north no more than a day's drive away; John was sure of that. But to the south, in this helter-skelter direction — John groaned.

By mid-afternoon sheer fatigue had slackened the pace. It was a slow walk, but still a relentless pace. Thirst now drove the animals more than fear. They would keep on going, John knew, until they found water, or were dead. The sand had parched their throats and burned their eyes until there was no reasoning, or no instinct.

They ate a hurried supper from the chuck wagon. Nothing tasted good.

John lingered a moment with his coffee. He felt a sense of futility. This dust showed no signs of abating. They couldn't last long against its continuous fury.

MARTHA called him to the wagon. She was choking from strain and fatigue. "Call the boys in, John," she said. "Let the cattle go."

John shook his head. Chase Mitchell rode up and dismounted. John eyed him grimly. Dust was thick upon Chase's black hair. He was not so good-looking now, John said to himself. But it was in John Cannon's nature to show a man the respect that man deserved. Mitchell had been in the saddle ever since the storm had struck.

Mitchell echoed Martha's appeal. "We're wearing ourselves out, Cannon," he said crisply. "Horses and men. We're not accomplishing anything."

"We're a day's march from water now," John snapped. "Let 'em run straight south and we'll lose 'em all."

"But it's so horrible," Martha moaned. "We can't keep it up, John."

"I say let the cattle go, Cannon," Chase Mitchell said authoritatively.

John Cannon grinned. For a moment he couldn't trust himself to speak. Then he shrugged his shoulders. What the hell did he care? This was a cattle drive. He was trail boss. He was captain aboard a ship, and the owner's word didn't mean a thing. He was a commander in battle, and he could take his superior's orders or leave them.

"We'll keep riding," he snapped. He felt for his saddle horn; he was almost blinded, too. "Coming along, Mitchell?" he demanded as he swung up.

He looked down at Chase and Martha Bell with a grin that caused Mitchell's lips to tighten, and Martha to look at him with hot resentment in her eyes. He knew what they were thinking. *For an overseer's son, you're acting high-handed. For a foreman, a hired hand, you are forgetting your place!*

Chase opened his mouth, closed it again. Finally, with a snap, he barked: "Right with you."

He mounted without another look at Martha Bell. His glance was for John Cannon, and there was no resentment there.

"Send the boys in for grub and a breather," proposed Chase. "You and I can hold the points 'til sundown."

John grinned again. This handsome man was throwing him a challenge. Mitchell's looks wouldn't help him on a horse, nor his family background.

"Sure," John agreed. "You and I can handle it."

He left orders for the wrangler to bring them out fresh mounts every two hours. Chase Mitchell, he promised himself, would see some riding this afternoon!

BACK AND FORTH along the front lines of the blind herd they rode, breaking the ranks of the leaders by main force, swinging their hats into the very faces of the mute stubborn animals. John Cannon was past being tired. It seemed to him neither cattle nor men could go on another hour. A dull slack feeling had come over his body; it was as if as he had no weight in the saddle.

A yell in his ear startled him. He realized he had been asleep in the saddle, with only his grip on the horn keeping him from falling.

Mitchell was jerking at his bridle and waving. With a gulp in his throat John realized that Chase was pointing out to him that the wind had changed, and that the cattle were now driving due north.

The change of wind, from direct north to south, meant the end of the sand storm and possibly the coming of rain.

It was not over yet. The steers were beyond calming. Theirs was a slow monotonous march, to the end of their thirst, one way or another.

"They're headed right," Mitchell yelled. "All we can do is let 'em go."

John nodded. Somewhere to the north the herd would stop—perhaps on the banks of a water hole, perhaps not.

Anyhow, John Cannon and Chase Mitchell could ride back to the wagons and the other weary riders could join them at the campfire, gulping coffee they didn't taste, wolfing food they were too tired to chew, then sleeping like dead insensible logs while five miles away, the Tall T herd plodded ahead.

No human hand was needed to guide them or push them. They would go as long as they could. And now, helping them, was the rain.

Before he slept John Cannon held out his hand to Chase Mitchell.

"You got the stuff, friend," he murmured.

Through half-closed eyes John was aware of a strange half-smile on Chase Mitchell's face. Then John was dreaming. It was a strange dream. A woman who looked exactly like Martha Bell came to him as he lay underneath the wagon and touched her lips to his cheek in a soft kiss.

V

FIFTEEN MILES AWAY a crooked creek bed temporarily flooded by the light rain had stopped the cattle's march. The water was only a trickle when riders and wagons reached it, but the horses quenched their thirst, the canvas tank underneath Limpy's rolling kitchen was replenished, and the Tall T drove on toward Doan's Crossing with only fifteen head lost from blindness and thirst.

Theirs was a slow pace for a few days. Blindness healed slowly in both animals and men. But the sun was gentle in their faces and other creeks were still running from the recent rain. They came to the Red River five miles up from Doan's and bedded down the herd in mid-afternoon.

Martha Bell wanted to go into Doan's to buy clothes, blankets and provisions. John had agreed when Chase Mitchell came striding up, his face dark with disapproval.

"Simpson would know we're to be at Doan's," he pointed out. "I'll ride in and see how the land lays."

Simpson! John had almost forgotten the carpetbagger. It seemed like an age since they had left the Neuces country.

"We'd better cross here in the morning," Chase said. "Or this afternoon if we can."

"We need things at Doan's," John protested. "Supplies. Groceries, especially."

"We can come back across the river for them," said Chase. "As soon as this herd is across the Red, Cannon, it's free of Texas law."

Martha's face was drawn up again, pinched with worry. "Can't we get across tonight, John?" she begged.

"It's four o'clock," John said. "We couldn't make it by dark. We need to go down the river aways anyhow. It's swifter here."

"I'd say take a chance," argued Mitchell.

"I'd rather take a chance on Simpson," John shrugged.

Chase glared at John a moment. Then he swung away and they observed him talking to Pecos Campbell, who had been up the trail before. Both of them walked to the river and back. Pecos was shaking his head doggedly. Chase finally gave up and returned to Martha's wagon.

"Pecos says the same," he reported. "I guess there's nothing to do but wait 'til morning and go farther down the river. Pecos says there are quick-sand bars along here."

Martha started to speak but John waved her down. "What's the idea of conferring with my men about my decisions, Mitchell?" he snapped.

He had stood it as long as he could. *You work hard, my good man, but we can't trust your judgment in a time like this. I will talk to Pecos and see if you are right.*

"Pecos has crossed the Red before," Chase explained lamely. There was a queer gleam in the handsome man's eyes.

"This herd crosses the Red when I say," growled John. "There may come a time when you're bossing the Tall T, Mitchell, but it ain't so now. Until that time comes, keep your trap shut."

"John!" Martha Bell exclaimed.

Chase Mitchell stood looking at Cannon with a half-smile. John whirled on Martha.

"If you wanna back his play," he said hoarsely, "you can have the herd. Mebbe he'd make a better foreman. But I'm tired of doing a ramrod's work without a ramrod's authority. Think it over."

And he turned and stalked to the chuck wagon. Several of the hands had heard him speak out. He knew from the inscrutability of their faces that they approved of his stand. Limpy poured him a cup of coffee and he sat with his back to Martha's wagon and talked casually to Pecos and Skinny Etheridge. There was no mention of the Red crossing. A cowboy could show a society lady something about being quick and casual with small talk.

Supper was early—fresh meat. Limpy cut small filets and tossed them into a steaming pot of pure animal fat. In a moment they were crisp but tender. Eating took a long time. There was sky-larking and, while they were still drinking coffee, a vaquero brought out his battered guitar and their voices joined in carefree, discordant song.

Chase edged up to Cannon. "Care to ride in to Doan's with me?"

It was still light. John noticed the color of Chase's face, dark and stern.

"Might as well," John said. He came to his feet. "Boys, mebbe I'll bring back a couple of quarts from Doan's," he said. "We'll get across first thing in the morning. On the other side we'll cut loose a small wolf."

There was no disagreement. They rode a half-mile in silence. Then Chase said, "I intended to go alone. But Martha wouldn't hear of it unless you came along."

"What's the idea?" John demanded.

"Just a look-see," Chase shrugged. "Haven't dropped in on Doan's in quite a spell."

IT WAS just dark when they reached the clearing. On every side of them campfires twinkled. "Must be a dozen herds up here," John murmured.

"Doan's is some place in the trailing season," Chase volunteered.

John turned in his saddle. "For a man who was in prison so damned long," he said, "you know a lot about this country."

"I'm a smart hombre," Chase grinned back. "I learn things quicker than most men."

The dusty clearing was jammed. Saddled trail horses rimmed it in a solid line near the trees. In the shade of a high Pittsburg freight outfit men squatted around card games and dice, drinking whiskey out of a keg.

Chase caught Cannon's arm. "You and me split up here," he whispered. "You never saw me before. *Sabe?*"

John didn't *sabe*. But Chase had slipped away before he could ask further questions. John nodded to some of the men who looked up as he passed and walked through them toward the store. Near it a pile of bleached buffalo bones stood as high as a haystack.

Doan's store was long and narrow with red earth mounded over the low roof. Oak posts, standing upright close together and their ends deeply buried, formed the walls. There was only one door, in front, and four small windows, without glass, along one side. Thickly scattered between the posts were slits no more than a width of a rifle barrel.

John stopped at the threshhold. It wasn't crowded inside. Most trail men preferred to take their drinks in the open. There were a few Army men in their blue, yellow-striped uniforms.

"Cannon!" a voice sung out.

John turned. Striding toward him from one of the dice games came Gordon Simpson. There was a triumphant twinkle in the carpetbagger's eyes. Behind came a stooped mustached man who wore a star.

"Deputy Sheriff Prescott," Simpson said. Then, in good-natured regret, he went on, "You people made a good play, Cannon. If I didn't hate to be taken in so damned bad, I would have wished you got across the Red higher up."

"No way to cross except at Doan's," John said.

"You came through the Staked Plains, didn't you?" Simpson asked. "That's trailing, Cannon. Mebbe now that I'm taking over the Tall T, you'll think about that job with me."

"Are you taking over the Tall T?" John countered.

Prescott reached in his pockets. "A warrant for trying to run mortgaged property out of the state," gloated the deputy. "Miss Martha Bell will go back to face trial like any other law-breaker."

"I'm not going to prosecute if she acts reasonable," Simpson assured John. "I got no hard feelings that you people tried to make a run for it. I'm foreclosing on the Tall T right away, of course. Got to. Next time I turn my back you people might jump for Mexico."

John nodded. For a moment he couldn't help relishing the humiliation of Martha Bell. And of Chase Mitchell. But that feeling was only momentary.

"Come in," Simpson proposed, taking John's arm, "and I'll buy a drink."

John hesitated. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he accepted. Why not? Why not even go to work for Gordon Simpson? What else was there for him? This only meant he was cutting loose from Martha Bell that much quicker, at Doan's instead of in Kansas. They went inside.

"I've run up quite a bill waiting here for you," grinned the carpetbagger. "By rights, that ought to be added to the mortgage."

John ordered a whiskey. He toyed with the glass a moment, thinking about Martha Bell. Maybe she deserved it, but he hated to see the Tall T end this way. And Chase Mitchell? What would Chase do? John was no nearer to liking Mitchell than before. Two men who loved the same woman would never like each other. But John had come to learn that Mitchell was no helpless Southern aristocrat. The war had changed that. Mitchell could take care of himself.

JOHN was facing the door when he saw Mitchell come in. There was no recognition in Chase's face and John gave him only an idle glance, as if he were a stranger. Mitchell came to the bar and ordered a drink.

Chase picked up his glass and then sat it down again. Simpson had not noticed him up to this moment.

"Mind backing away from the bar?" Chase demanded, touching Simpson's shoulder. "I don't like to drink at the same bar with a damned carpetbagger."

"Every man to his own taste," Simpson answered. "But it happens I was here first, friend. If you don't like the present company, carry your drink outside."

"I said get away from the bar," snapped Chase. He reached out deliberately and gave Simpson a shove. The carpetbagger

crashed against the wall, but did not lose his footing.

"Here, here," Deputy Prescott barked. "Any more of that and I'll—"

"You'll what?" demanded Mitchell. "Your tin star ain't worth a nickel here. You're a county law, and this ain't your county." He jerked the star from the deputy's vest and flung it to the floor.

John Cannon watched calmly. The several men inside the saloon had backed away, giving Mitchell just about all the room there was. John stood against the wall himself. He was pressed close against a bearded man who had the smell of a trapper.

"Who's mixing it up?" John heard the bearded man whisper to his companion, a small wiry chap dressed in buckskin.

"I think the guy running the show is Jim Coy, mebbe. You know how Jim hates Yanks."

Gordon Simpson gave the deputy a snappish "Lemme handle this" and took two steps toward Chase. Prescott was glad to join the other spectators against the back wall.

"If you're looking for trouble, friend," Simpson said pleasantly, "you've come to the right place."

"Your mouth is big," sneered Chase. "What else you got?"

John noticed that still Simpson didn't seem indignant. The carpetbagger waved to a handful of the loafers.

"Back away," he warned. "I think nothing but shooting will satisfy this galoot."

And Simpson waited calmly until the room was clear in front of him. Chase also stood limp, slouching forward a little. Gordon Simpson took a step forward, eyes still bright in amusement, and made a sudden move toward his holster. John's eyes leaped to Chase Mitchell. Chase's father had been a famous duelist, but this was a different type of shooting. There were no seconds and no silver-handled pistols.

John saw Mitchell's right hand flash, and then heard the roar of Chase's gun. Simpson stopped in his tracks. He stood calmly there a moment, and it shocked John when the carpetbagger suddenly wobbled on his feet and then fell on his face. For a moment John had been sure that Chase had missed altogether.

Chase slipped his smoking gun back into its holster. His face was grim, yet no man could have turned his back upon a slaughtered jack rabbit with more indifference.

"Another drink," he said harshly. "I didn't enjoy the other."

The nervous bartender hurriedly filled his glass. Chase turned again. He pointed toward Prescott, the deputy. "If you're still here by morning," he threatened, "I'll treat you the same."

John saw the deputy's lips twitch. Prescott, John was sure, would be many miles from Doan's by morning.

Slowly Chase sipped his whiskey. Then he threw a silver dollar on the bar and stalked out.

Not until he was gone did the loafers leave their perch against the walls. The bartender took charge of Simpson's body.

"He was drinking with you," the barkeep appealed to John. "Know anything about him?"

"Just bumped into him outside," shrugged John. "Never saw him before."

John ordered another drink. Business was rushing; every man who had witnessed the killing needed a shot. John listened to their excited talk with silent amusement.

"That musta been Jim Coy," one man kept insisting. "I saw him once in Lost Lodge."

"Who is Jim Coy?" John asked of his neighbor.

"Had a gang of guerillas," he was told. "But I'm not sure this was Jim Coy. I heard he got his out in Wyoming."

"Coy wouldn't come this far down," said another. "The Yanks want Coy worse than they want a drink."

John emptied his glass and started back toward camp. A mile from Doan's he was hailed from behind, and Chase Mitchell galloped up beside him.

"I reckon, Cannon," Chase said gently, "Miss Martha needn't know what happened."

"None of my business to tell her," John shrugged.

VI

THE RED RIVER WAS PEACEable by the next morning. By early afternoon the last of the herd was across, and they were feasting on delicacies from

Doan's—sardines, crackers, sour pickles. Martha Bell joined them in song at the campfire. The tightness was gone from her face. She laughed with them, and it seemed to John that she made flirtatious eyes at Chase Mitchell, who was the glum member of the party. There was something here, John decided. He heard their voices later in the night, and Martha's tone was imperious. John grinned. Chase would cowtail to her; every man had to.

Except him. They were half-way to Kansas now. They had tricked Gordon Simpson out of ten thousand cash and the steers would bring more when they hit the railroad. Chase Mitchell could have his stake and his haughty bride and be damned. She was a woman any man wanted in his arms, but a man who knew her like John Cannon did would know when he was well off.

MARTHA noticed the change in him. She noticed the humor wrinkles in his face and the lazy swagger to his walk whenever he was out of the saddle.

"The trail has done you good, John," she commented. "You seem to be a different man."

She had been forced to come to the campfire to get a word with him. John never went near the wagon, and for some reason Martha did not try summoning him with an imperious wave. Perhaps she sensed the revolt in the big man and knew that he could be driven no further.

John nodded. He could not tell her in plain words what had changed him, that he was free of his blind worship and trembling silence before her moods.

The campfire was only a faint glow, for the night was warm and most of the riders were already asleep. John went to the chuck wagon for his coffee and Martha asked with a faint smile that he pour her a cup, too. John obeyed. She stirred in sugar, looking at him with big solemn eyes.

"Are you still leaving us—in Kansas?" she asked faintly.

John nodded. "I need an outfit of my own," he said crisply. "Mebbe I'll even go back to Texas."

"John," she said softly, "tell me about Doan's. Did you see Simpson?"

"Get Chase to tell you," he shrugged.

"He refused." Martha Bell's eyes clouded. "You men—you are natural allies. You team together against a woman."

"And even then," John grinned, "we are outnumbered. Simpson, Chase, me—none of the three of us—not *all* three of us—could hold you an even show."

"That isn't fair, John," she protested.

But she was leaning forward with that look of hers that had wrung John's heartstrings before, that had tricked Gordon Simpson out of his money and then his life, that probably accounted for Chase Mitchell's long absences from the campfire.

"You must go on to Wyoming with us, John," she whispered.

John Cannon chuckled. It wasn't a pleasant laugh.

"For a long time you had me jumping through a loop," he said. "You looked at me like that and you had me grabbing for leather."

"John, what are you talking about!" she protested, cheeks red.

"You never have been handled right," he said hoarsely. "When you pull that act on a man, you need . . ."

He stopped his speech. Why not? Without a warning he caught her in his arms and his strength pressing her to him brought a moan of pain to her lips. His mouth covered hers, fiercely, cruelly. Then he pushed her back.

"When you sit by a man in the night and look at him like that," he told her harshly, "you have that coming to you. And more."

He expected her fury, and he was set for it with the spirit of a man who would have soon have walked into a buzz saw as not. But instead there was an expression on her face that left him speechless and wondering. The fire's glow showed her eyes to be wide and her lips trembling.

Slowly she stood up. Without a word she walked to her wagon.

John turned back to the chuck wagon for another cup of coffee and there was Chase Mitchell standing there, legs set apart. John Cannon started. He would not have been human if he had not felt a quick fear. He had seen this dark handsome man shoot down Gordon Simpson the night before. He knew that Chase Mitchell was not merely a freed prisoner-of-war riding back to claim his bride after six years, but a

man who had followed trails they knew nothing about, who might not be Jim Coy, the guerilla, but who was certainly a gunman who had killed before Simpson.

John filled his cup, returned to the fire and kicked the ashes into a glow, all the time waiting, wondering.

He heard a stirring behind him but did not turn his head. Then Chase Mitchell joined him at the fire with coffee, stirring his with a tin spoon.

"We're getting into Indian country," Chase murmured.

John nodded. He shot Mitchell a sidewise glance. There was a half-grin on Chase's mouth.

"We'd better trail fast while the cows are feeling good," John said. "I'm turning in now."

As he rolled up in his blankets, he remembered the warmth of Martha's lips and the startled wonder of her eyes when he had pushed her away. And then he recalled Chase Mitchell's half-smile. Why hadn't Mitchell challenged him? What kind of a man stood by and watched his fiancée mauled and kissed by her foreman?

Whatever Mitchell's reason for not interfering, John Cannon knew it wasn't fear.

THE next morning a troop of cavalry rode down upon them while they were eating. Their leader was a young lieutenant who saluted as he dismounted and then tipped his cap to Martha Bell.

"Your foreman, please?" the officer asked crisply. He was no more than a youth with West Point written all over him.

John stepped forward. "There are several parties of Cheyenne Dakotas in this vicinity," the officer said. "The Comanches are in a peaceful frame of mind, but some of the Cheyennes are said to be wearing war paint."

"We'll watch for them," John said. "Much obliged."

"You're violating the treaty under which we operate this territory," the lieutenant said sternly, "so we cannot furnish you with official protection. I don't know what you cattlemen expect. This country belongs to Indians by treaty. I don't blame them for seizing every opportunity to molest trail herds."

"You tend to the cavalry, son," John drawled, "and we'll look after the cattle."

The lieutenant crimsoned at thus being ridiculed before his men. "We have petitioned Washington for authority to stop trail drives through Comanche territory," he snapped. "I hope we get their approval; we'll turn you Texans back at the Red and keep this country peaceable."

"Let us know when you do," John shrugged.

"Another thing," went on the lieutenant. "At Doan's last week there was a killing. Several herds crossed about the same time, and we're not sure which outfit the killer came from. Do you know anything about a Jim Coy?"

"Never heard of him," John answered quickly. "Who is he?"

"A guerilla wanted for murder, horse thievery and selling whiskey to the Indians."

"Must be some hombre," shrugged John. "No, Lieutenant, we haven't seen your amigo. We're a Texas outfit moving to Wyoming, where there ain't carpetbag rule. If the Indians don't bother us, we won't bother them."

"They'll bother you," the officer predicted. "And don't come to us for help. We're here to protect the Indians, not the cattlemen."

"Reckon we'll try to paddle our own canoe," John murmured.

The lieutenant nodded. He tipped his hat again to Martha Bell as he mounted his horse. "For the lady's sake," he said grimly, "I hope the Cheyennes don't spot her. If they come into your camp, keep her under cover by all means. The Cheyennes are always eager for white women."

He saluted and his troop clattered away. John turned to the chuck wagon to replenish his plate. Chase Mitchell stepped out from behind its shelter. The two men exchanged glances, but no words. With a nod Chase went to his horse, and out to relieve one of the point riders.

The warning of Cheyenne in the vicinity threw a blanket of gloomy tenseness over the outfit. They took their rifles out of the saddle scabbards when they slept, which was fitfully, and the drag men worked feverishly to keep the herd close together. Two days dragged by, with the excitement and fear of anticipation, until it was almost in relief that they saw an Indian

party breast the ridge in front of them and come slowly toward the wagon.

It was not a war party, else the red men would have come at a running charge. John Cannon watched them with grim curiosity. Not in his lifetime had he dealt with hostile Indians; the Tejas in the Neuces country had been subdued before John reached his 'teens.

They were a nondescript lot as far as dress was concerned; some wore pants but were naked from the waist up, others wore brown reservation shirts with only a loincloth under the long tails. A few had on old felt hats but most were bareheaded with their black hair done in double braids.

But they were warriors. John Cannon could see that. And they were not awed by the white men. Washington, John thought grimly, was responsible for that. Jerkwater lieutenants had assured the red men this was their country, and that the Great White Father would protect them from trespassing white men.

John started forward but Chase Mitchell caught his shoulder. "Better let me handle this," said Chase.

John did not resent this usurping of his authority. He followed a half-step behind Chase.

The Indian chief was young, no more than a buck, and John had heard enough of Indians to know this was bad. A war party led by a young chief was too eager for scalps. This chief wore a breech clout of blanket cloth and moccasins, scorning the cast-off regalia of the white man. His hairless chest had the look of polished brown leather and was badly scarred as if from the slash of a knife. He held his roached head up high, looking not at Chase, but at the wagons and the riders.

His sharp gaze did not miss a thing, and John was grateful for the thick canvas sides of Martha's wagon. This chief was a bad hombre; it showed in his narrow gleaming eyes and cruel mouth.

Chase squatted, facing the chief, and John did likewise. It suited Cannon to have Mitchell do the talking. John knew that Chase had been through this before; Mitchell obviously knew Indians.

For a time there was no word spoken. Then the Cheyenne likewise squatted and broke out in gutturals. Chase answered. Then he interpreted freely to John Cannon.

"He says his white brothers are off the trail, that this country belongs to his good friends, the Comanches. He says our herd has frightened the buffalo away and he is very hungry. His people are weak and his women are dying."

JOHN'S lips tightened. The Cheyennes didn't look hungry to him. Nor did this chief have the subdued look of a weak race.

"I have told him we are passing through," Chase explained. "I have told him we are not trying to take land that belongs to the Comanches."

The young chief talked further. "He is called Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind," Chase grinned. "He is the greatest fighter among the Cheyennes. He has come far in search of meat, and he must not let his people go hungry. He asks for fifty head of cattle to make up for the buffalo we have driven away."

"Offer him ten," John proposed.

Chase jabbered back. John was surprised at how easily Mitchell handled the dialect. Three years since surrender. Mitchell must have never been in prison at all, must have spent this time since Appottomax roaming this very country with his guerilla band. John shot a look back over his shoulder at Martha's wagon. Was she taking this in? Was she beginning to wonder about the past of Chase Mitchell?

Then he started and stifled a curse.

Martha Bell had stuck her head out between folds of the canvas and the Indian chief had seen her!

Chase also realized this. He turned his head and caught a glimpse of Martha ducking back into the wagon.

"Hell's to pay," Mitchell said grimly to John. "He asks how many of our women are with us."

"Tell him only a demented sister," John answered. He remembered that the Indians had an awesome respect for a demented person, and would never harm one.

Chase jabbered but shook his head. "He isn't falling for that," Mitchell sighed. "He says to give his people twenty steers and they will ride away."

John studied the Indian's face. Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind had a thin sneer on his narrow lips. Man-Who-Rides-

Like-The-Wind was sizing up their party with a cold analytical gaze. John's heart sank.

"He's only stalling for time, isn't he?"

"I think so," Chase nodded. "But let's give him the steers. That'll hold him a while."

John agreed. Chase communicated this acceptance to the young chief. Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind bobbed his head. The Indians themselves rounded up the twenty head. Riding low on their horses' necks, they slaughtered the cattle then and there, aping a buffalo hunt, screaming triumphantly when a startled bawling steer went down under their spears and ragged rifle fire.

It was a disgusting sight. John could bear to watch it no longer. Chase joined him at the campfire.

"They'll attack tonight," Chase said in a low tone. "This is a young buck. He wants glory among his people. It will make him famous among them if he steals a young white woman and carries her back as his slave."

Now the Cheyennes were retiring over the ridge to gorge themselves. Martha Bell came out of the wagon, white, trembling, and John glared at her.

"I feel like taking a horse whip to you myself," he growled. "Did you think you could look at the Cheyennes and they'd melt in their tracks? It'd serve you right if we turned you over to Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind and went on."

Martha's lips moved piteously, but without sound, and her eyes filled with quick tears.

"It's been done," Chase said quietly. "Ragging her about it won't help."

"I guess not," John conceded.

"We'll draw up the wagons tonight," Chase said. "Bed the cattle down around us. They'll help against a surprise attack. Double guard."

John nodded. Then both men were silent, pondering the peril ahead of them. But not Martha Bell. She was staring at Chase, and after a while she spoke her thoughts. "How long were you in prison, Chase?" she asked quietly.

John's eyes leaped to Mitchell's face. He saw the struggle there. Then he saw Chase's head go up, and his eyes flash.

"Not a damned day," Chase snapped, and left them to take charge of drawing the three wagons up into a circle.

VII

THE DRAGMEN CLOSED IN, the point riders swung sharply, and three thousand longhorns began turning back upon themselves until they were spread out in a "U" shape. John Cannon was satisfied. The trail-tamed beasts settled down for the night as he had wished. Two flanks and their rear were protected from a night attack by the humps of already dozing cattle.

Ahead of them a brown spot showed on the ridge. It grew larger. John gripped his rifle and looked around him again. Martha was sheltered under the big wagon. The trembling horses were tethered between the cook wagon and the extra vehicle. Every man was ready, calmly watching the brown spot which was no longer a solid color, but now distinct riders, their mounts streaked with red and yellow, their naked painted bodies and black heads lying close to their horses' backs. They came on a steady trot, knee to knee in a widespread line. Then, all at once, the red men were galloping forward in a horrible charge, spreading out, surging forward like a great tossing wave.

John held his fire as long as he could. Beyond his own sights he saw a gap break wide open. It was a withering fire. Horses went down, riders plunging with them, unable to kick free of the rawhide loops that held their legs.

The charge broke and scattered. They had not lost a man. There was nothing to show for the hail of bullets the Cheyennes had fired while galloping forward.

Chase came to John. "It isn't over yet," Mitchell said with the air of a man who knew Indians. "Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind is a young buck. He was a fool to charge us with so few men. His older chiefs will tell him so."

Chase pointed to the ridge where the routed Cheyennes had gathered. They had lost half of their number in this wild foray. But there was still a score of the red men.

They were building a huge fire. "For smoke signals," explained Chase.

"They probably won't attack again to-

night," decided John. "Let's get what rest we can."

Dark came slowly. They could hear the Cheyennes chanting and see the Indians' roaring fire. But, as John had predicted, there was no night attack. Morning was gray and tardy, with a drizzle in the air about them as they set the herd in motion.

"Well, we can't wait 'em out," Chase said.

They started late; they stopped early. They kept the cattle closely bunched. It was an eerie feeling; they could look up the ridge and see the smoke spirals lifting upward, and, by midafternoon, they knew other bands of Indians were coming to the assistance of Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind. Just before sundown they sighted a large party coming across the prairies at a slow trot.

"That will be an older chief," Chase guessed. "War is old business to him; he isn't galloping his horses."

"There must be a hundred of them now," John sighed.

The drizzle turned into a fleeting rain, leaving them soaked, then became a grey mist again. The herd submitted to another close bunching, and double guards rode behind the shelter of their hunched bodies. The stragglers could go. Sounds drifted to them out of the night, telling them that the Cheyennes were making war medicine. Prowling braves would account for any guard who ventured out beyond the herd. The sudden bawling of a steer told them the red men had slaughtered a drifting animal.

They had no campfire, fearing a sniper. They munched cold sourdough biscuits and beans and kept close to the shelter of the wagons. John stayed away from Martha Bell despite the piteous appeal of her eyes. He didn't want to trust his speech. As Chase had said, there was no point in ragging her.

John turned in shortly after midnight. Every change of guards came into the wagon and reported much chanting and dancing, but no inclination on the part of the red men to attack. John guessed that dawn would be the zero hour, and had every man out of his blankets an hour before daybreak.

Except one.

HE DID NOT MISS Chase Mitchell for a while. The tiers of darkness were lifting and they were straining their eyes into the gray gloom when John wanted to ask Chase something. He called for Mitchell and there was no answer.

"He was sleeping by me," volunteered Pecos.

There was Mitchell's bed roll. But Chase himself had vanished. John strode to Martha's wagon. "Know anything about Chase?"

Her denial was quick and sincere. Then she was crying again. "Oh, John! Chase didn't run away, did he? Not Chase."

"I don't think so," John said slowly. "I don't believe running away is Chase's style."

He looked down at her pitilessly. "I think he was a guerilla for awhile," he said. "I know he is a gun slick, and that yarn of his about being in prison didn't have a word of truth in it. But, at that, he is too damned good for you."

"Yes, John," she said meekly. Martha Bell was beyond crying. Her eyes were bright and that was all.

"Has Mitchell skipped out?" demanded Pecos as John returned to the chuck wagon.

"I sent him for help," John said in quick inspiration. He did not understand why he felt impelled to defend Mitchell.

"Where?" demanded Pecos. "Yank troops won't be in a hurry to help us. They'll come, all right, but in their own sweet time."

John shrugged his shoulders in lieu of a reply. How could he pretend to know the answers?

Another cold meal, and they started the herd. A hundred hostile eyes watched them from the ridges. John took the point closest to the red men.

They were grateful for the slow drizzle. The cattle showed no disposition to straggle, but kept bunched without protest. Morning passed with no challenge from the ridges. The Indians were there; occasionally they sighted a sentry.

Then, an hour after eating cold biscuits and beans in the misting rain, John saw the first Indian party come galloping over the hills.

There was a score of them. They struck the herd at the far point and John heard

Pecos' Springfield bark. Then he saw Pecos galloping back toward the wagons. One man couldn't stem such an attack. Several braves were in hot pursuit of the rider but most of the Indians bore down upon the herd, striking it in a flying-wedge formation. Their terrific impact sent a wave of motion through the closely-bunched cattle.

There was a rattle of gunfire; the Indians were shooting off their muskets into the very faces of the frightened beasts. John cursed and galloped for the wagons. The red men were out to stampede the herd!

John was now fighting his way among milling frightened cattle. As yet none of the steers had bolted. Grazing had been good, water plentiful; they were a trail-tamed lot. But now, across the sea of waving humps, John saw the remuda breaking up, and screaming, pitching horses fighting with the steers that blocked their way.

John's buckskin snapped at the bobbing bawling steers with the ferocity of an aroused dog. But now, behind John, around him, cattle had broken out of the mass and into a dead run. Despite its fury, the buckskin was swept back. Neither horse nor man could turn this tide. John battled it a moment, then whirled his mount around to ride with it.

A dozen times he was sure the buckskin would go down. There was still gunfire behind him. Some of the shooting was from the Springfields his men carried, but most of the reports had a sharp staccato sound. The Cheyennes were making sure the stampede was a real one. Their yells floated up to John as the rolling swell of humps and horns carried him farther and farther. Turning back was out of the question now. It was all the buckskin could do to keep up.

And the horse had the bit in its teeth. For the moment the will to live, to keep from being trampled under these thundering hoofs, was stronger than the will of its rider. John was almost pitched off as the buckskin leaped off at an angle, screaming in pain and fright as a sharp horn gored its flank.

But fright lent speed and staying powers to the horse. Mile after mile flew by. Soon the stampede had run itself out, and John could turn the buckskin aside.

But, with a gasp, the horse fell forward. John's left leg was caught in the stirrups and given a painful wrench.

The buckskin was dead. It had run its heart out.

John struggled free. He must be twenty miles away from the starting point of the stampede, where the three wagons containing Aunt Lula, Uncle Ike and Martha Bell had been left by grim necessity to the mercy of the Cheyennes.

With a curse he started walking across the ridges that had been trampled into soft dust by the hooves of three thousand stampeding steers.

He hobbled painfully for a mile, favoring his injured leg. Then he sighted three of their remuda peacefully grazing in a grassy valley. Two of the horses bolted at his whistle but the third surrendered to him, and John swiftly converted the rope halter into a makeshift hackamore. He rode a few yards bareback, then returned to where his buckskin had fallen and rescued his saddle.

He did not see a Cheyenne as he rode back over the route of the stampede. Slim Maddox joined him, and Slim reported that Pecos, One-Eye Duncan and Felipe Vega were holding about a thousand steers some five miles to the west. Slim's horse was spent; John told him to capture a fresh mount from the straying remuda and follow. He himself could not wait longer to learn what had happened to Martha Bell.

He rode grimly on.

VIII

IT WAS NEARLY DARK when he reached the wagons. One had been overturned, whether by Cheyennes or the bolting remuda John could not tell. The red men had not bothered to burn them. Canvas had been ripped and the contents hurriedly looted.

Most of the foodstuffs were untouched. The savages, however, had gone wild inside Martha's wagon. Her dresses were scattered over the ground, many of them torn to shreds.

Aunt Lulu lay against a wagon wheel, her head crushed in by a blow from some blunt instrument, probably a gun butt.

Uncle Ike's body was underneath's Martha's wagon. Further on lay a corpse John could identify without closer examination as Limpy Callahan, by his own admission the best damned trail cook of them all.

None of the three had been scalped. Evidently the Cheyennes had been in a hurry to escape to the hills with their prize—the slim white-faced girl who had peered out from the wagon.

There were signs that she had struggled. John regretted Martha's determined refusal to ever keep any kind of a gun around her. One bullet would have saved her from the torture ahead.

His first impulse was to gallop in open swift pursuit, to try and ride down the Cheyenne party and fight them single-handed. Then reason conquered his anger, and he let his tired pony drop into a slow walk.

He could dare to hope that Martha was still alive and unharmed. It was a good omen that she had been carried away; the usual way of the Cheyennes was violation on the spot, and then slaughter. Some chieftain, probably Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind, wanted her for a wife. If so, she would be unharmed until the chief's camp was reached; then she would be paraded and fought over before the actual forced ceremony.

He returned to the wreckage of the three wagons. Three men drifted back before sundown, and they all ate a meager, unhappy meal. John decided to let pursuit of the Cheyennes wait until morning, when their horses would be fresh and themselves strengthened by a night's sleep. If sleep was possible.

He did doze. But the image of Martha Bell danced before his eyes. Her imperious voice rang in his ears. *You have done well, my good man. You are a good hired man. When we reach Wyoming, Chase and I will enjoy the results of your energies. Had you not been the son of an overseer, I might have fallen in love with you. I was thrilled by your kiss; I do not deny it. But the daughter of Bryan Bell couldn't marry the son of Jobe Cannon. You understand, my good man.*

The clatter of hooves in the distance brought him completely awake. He was grateful for the end of his nightmare, though for a moment he thought the horsemen might be the Cheyennes returning. But they came on with an even pace, and then a voice hailed the camp and a troop of cavalry galloped into the light of the fire John had hurriedly kicked up. Their leader was the same precise lieutenant who had warned them against crossing the Indian territory. With him was Chase Mitchell.

Mitchell was out of the saddle before his horse had stopped and swiftly surveyed the wreckage of the wagons. "Where's Martha?" he demanded.

"The Cheyennes got her," John sighed.

"And you're sleeping here!" snapped Chase. "Man, why aren't you after them? Don't you know how Indians treat captive white women?"

John glared back at him. He wanted to cry out, "At least I didn't run from a fight." But he held his speech for the slim, straight lieutenant.

"We fought 'em off once, Lieutenant," he explained. "Then they stampeded the herd. The cattle carried us away from the wagons. One party of 'em swooped down here, killed three people and carried off Miss Bell, our owner."

THE Lieutenant pursed his lips. He walked over to the wreckage of the wagons, and saw the fresh mounds of dirt that marked the graves of the three victims. Then he came back to the firelight.

"We have no orders about pursuing Indians," he said crisply. "However, the commander of a field unit can use his own discretion. We'll do our best to rescue Miss Bell."

"It may not be too late," John said. "Sometimes a redskin chief wants a white woman for his wife. We can hope that is what happened."

"Yes," nodded the lieutenant. The officer seemed to be nervous. So did Chase. John sensed their feelings.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded. Then, recalling the lieutenant's speech, "If you didn't come hell-for-leather to pursue Indians," he demanded, "What are you here for?"

The lieutenant stepped forward. "To arrest you in the name of the United States Government," he snapped. "You are my prisoner, Jim Coy."

"Jim Coy!"

John's eyes turned. How quickly the man could disappear! Chase Mitchell was standing there one moment, the next instant he was gone! The lieutenant didn't seem to have noticed Mitchell's quick silent flight.

"That's absurd, Lieutenant," John protested. "I have never been out of Texas in my life until this trail drive—except for the war."

The officer's lips pursed in a smile. "We have a witness, Coy, to your killing of Gordon Simpson at Doan's Crossing."

"Where is he?"

"Mr. Mitchell, perhaps—" the lieutenant was saying smoothly as he turned to where Chase had been standing. Just then they heard the clatter of hooves from where the handful of horses retrieved from the scattered remuda had been hobbled.

"The man is gone!" exclaimed the lieutenant.

"Yes," John nodded. "Chase Mitchell. Alias Jim Coy. You fell for that one, lieutenant."

"Yes," the officer said slowly. "Captain Hunter thought it sounded fishy. Up rode this man and promised to turn over Jim Coy to us if we would relieve the Tall T herd of an Indian attack. We rode all night—for this."

"He told you that?" John demanded.

"Promised us," the lieutenant said grimly.

"I think he'll keep his word," John Cannon murmured. "Calm down, Lieutenant, and get ready to chase the Indians in the morning."

"Without pursuing him?" was the angry retort. "We'll hound him until he drops. No man can make a fool of the U. S. Army."

"It's been done before," John Cannon could not resist saying. "Besides, Chase Mitchell is on a Texas horse that's fresher than any of your government mounts. Do you think one man could catch him, or a hundred?"

"No," the lieutenant conceded.

"I'll put on enough coffee for your men," John volunteered. "It'd be a feather in your cap to rescue Miss Bell from the Cheyennes, Lieutenant."

The officer's eyes brightened. "I'll need such a boost," he said, "after reporting back that I rode side by side with Jim Coy for forty miles without recognizing him."

The traditional bugle sounded at dawn and the soldiers were in the saddles thirty minutes later. John Cannon took his place alongside the lieutenant. Two other Tall T hands had returned to camp during the night; the six Texans fell right in among the calvarymen.

"Ever thought you'd ride under this flag again, Cannon?" the lieutenant smiled, nodding toward the flag bearer.

"No," John admitted. "But I quit fighting at Appottomax, Lieutenant. The end didn't come too soon for me."

The Cheyennes had left a plain trail, obviously not fearing pursuit. A bearded sergeant now rode ahead of the lieutenant, showing his skill at following a trail at every turn. The route of the Cheyennes led west, into canyon country, until the black Wichitas were looming ahead of them.

They pitched camp in a grassy canyon, gloomy and tired. The lieutenant ordered a watch and gratefully accepted the offer of the Texans to stand their turn. Pecos went off with the first squad.

John rolled in his blankets and tried to sleep. But the nightmare of Martha Bell's crisp voice and disapproving eyes would not leave him. He was muttering to himself when he was conscious of somebody shaking him. It was Pecos.

"Take it easy," Pecos whispered. "Mitchell's out there. Wants to see you."

JOHN arose stealthily, strapping on his gunbelt and followed Pecos into the dark. Mitchell was waiting a half-mile down the canyon. There was a sliver of moonlight plain in his face, and John saw how tired he was.

"I know where Martha is, Cannon," he said. "Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind has her in his camp."

"Is she all right?"

"Yes," Chase nodded. "The squaws have been roughing her up. But none of the bucks would bother a white woman their chief has picked out to marry."

John pondered a moment. "There are forty men in this troop," he mused.

Chase nodded. "The redskins don't even know they're close. They're gorging them-

selves on beef. But the calvary won't get to Martha, Cannon. At the first sign of attack, Man-Who-Rides-Like-The-Wind will take her and run. We have to get her out ourselves."

"The two of us?"

"That's the only way," Chase said grimly. "That's why I came back for you."

"Let's go," John snapped.

Chase motioned to John's feet. "You'll have to leave those high-heeled boots behind."

John noticed for the first time Chase was wearing moccasins. "An Indian guard stumbled across me," Mitchell shrugged. "I helped myself to his moccasins."

Chase's horse was tethered a hundred yards away. At John's suggestion, they slipped two fresh mounts out of the Tall T remuda. Pecos helped them. John took off his boots and gazed ruefully at the holes in his socks.

"Don't need a third hand, do you?" drawled Pecos.

"Two is as good as a regiment," denied Chase. "Here, you tell the lieutenant our trail."

And Chase etched a crude map in the sand by the light of a match.

"Follow this path up," he said. "If the calvary is up this ridge by daylight, they won't have any trouble."

"Give you how much time?" Pecos asked.

"Three hours will be enough."

Pecos nodded.

John fell in behind Chase. The sandy bottom of the canyon softened their riding. For an hour Chase led the way down the narrow twisting ravine.

"We've passed the camp," he said, "but I wanted to come as far as we could on horseback."

He stopped to roll a smoke. John marveled at the man's lack of nerves. He himself was trembling from head to toe.

"Sorry about that deal I tried to pull on you," Chase murmured. "About you being Jim Coy instead of me. But I had to promise the Captain I could take 'em to Coy before he'd send out a troop. Right now the Army is siding with the Indians against the Texas cattlemen. The commander of this area is a die-hard damned Yankee who don't see why U. S. troops should be sent out to protect rebels."

John nodded.

"When I saw Martha was gone," continued Chase, "I pointed you out as Coy. I would have straightened it out, Cannon, even if the lieutenant hadn't seen through it so quick. I figured I was a better hand at sneaking into an Indian camp than you are."

"I had that figured out," John grinned. "The lieutenant was right upset. Figgered you had played him for a sucker. I told him if you had promised him Coy, you'd deliver him Coy."

"Yeah," Chase sighed. "I'll keep my word." He crushed out a cigarette. "Let's go on," he snapped.

They turned up a smaller canyon, and up a little slope that went gently toward a big meadow that made a lighter pool of gray in the dark basin of trees. John realized with a gasp that the faint dull lights were the Indian campfires.

Chase caught his arm. They were sheltered now by the oak trunks. Mitchell pointed to a black shadow.

'That's the chief's lodge. Martha is in there. Sneak around and cut a hole in the back. Wait 'til you hear hell break loose, then go in and get her. Your only chance will be to run for it."

"What are you going to do?" John demanded.

Chase pointed to another grove across the clearing from them. "Their remuda is tethered there. I'm gonna cut 'em loose and stampede 'em. The whole camp will turn out. A redskin hates to lose his horse worse than a cowboy."

"Mebbe I'd better stampede the remuda," John suggested, "and you sneak out with Martha."

"No," Chase said firmly. Then, with a faint grin, "I doubt if the man who stampedes that remuda gets out, Cannon."

"I can take my chance on that as well as you can," John snapped.

"You can," agreed Chase. "Martha can't."

HE HITCHED his belt. "This is a pretty good way to settle all the dust on the trail, Cannon," he said slowly. "I've been watching things. Martha has clung to me because of something that was a long time ago, and that will never come back. She'll never admit it isn't there as

long as she knows I'm alive. It was a dream to her, and a woman just has one dream at a time. But you're the man for Martha, Cannon. It's up to you to make her see things your way."

John remembered the trembling response of Martha Bell's soft warm lips, and he nodded. "I can make her see it, Mitchell," he said with sudden confidence. For a moment he was amazed at his own presumption. *Him an overseer's son. Him a foreman, a hired man.*

"All this business," said Chase, "this borrowing from Gordon Simpson, this trailing to Wyoming to make a new start. None of it was my idea. I knew it wouldn't work all along. I listened to Martha because . . . well, I wanted to listen. But I was in too deep. I knew it."

"How did you get in, Mitchell?" John asked.

"I couldn't ride back to Martha empty-handed," shrugged Chase. "I couldn't go back to my country with nothing but the ragged clothes on my back and a sorry horse under me. I figured on piling up a stake, quitting, going back home in style, rebuilding the house, restoring the plantation. It was easy to start, Cannon. It was hell to quit."

He chuckled softly. "We can't palaver here all night. Good luck, Cannon."

John nodded. He watched Chase slip silently between the trees. Then, crawling on his hands and knees, he circled the clearing, came in behind the lodge Mitchell had indicated, and lay against its side for cover. Inside he heard a soft sobbing, as if someone was crying in their sleep. He took out his knife and waited.

He heard the horses, then a loud defiant yell that must have come from Chase Mitchell, then the tumult as the Indian camp awoke in panic. There were guttural shouts, the wild eerie wailing of women, the shrill screaming of papooses! Off in the trees Mitchell was firing both guns into the air. John grinned as he hacked away on the skin wall of the lodge. It sounded like a regiment out there—noise enough to awake the dead.

"Martha!" he called as he finished cutting his hole.

"John!" she answered immediately. "Oh, thank God!"

A squaw rushed into the lodge at the sound of their voices and John seized her by the throat just as she started to give the alarm. He was cruel with his choking; he knew as the Indian woman dropped to the ground that he had strangled her to death.

He groped in the darkness of the lodge, guided by Martha's low voice. She was tied firmly; he slashed at the bonds, cutting his own hand in his haste.

Then she was standing by him. She couldn't walk; she had been bound tightly these long hours. John seized her up in his arms and crawled back through the hole he had cut in the lodge wall. A shouting warrior dashed around the lodge, almost colliding with them. Moonlight glinted on the brave's spear.

John leaped into the clear and went for his guns. The brave whirled after him, raising his spear for a mighty thrust. John's bullets caught him there, in chest and stomach.

There was screaming panic around them. The staccato sound of gunfire was already coming from across the clearing. Screaming squaws set up a din even louder than the shooting.

John held Martha tight and ran boldly for the higher ground. It seemed almost impossible that they weren't seen. It flashed through John's mind that he had heard Indian fighters describe the complete confusion in a redskin camp when taken by surprise.

This had seemed an insane idea at first, a scheme born out of Chase Mitchell's desperation. But, reaching an oak clump, stumbling in among heavy tie vines, John laid down his trembling burden, and stood guard over her with drawn guns and a low laugh as he dared to think of success.

For Pecos could be depended upon to have the lieutenant up and in the saddle before dawn.

MARTHA was moaning. John bent over her. "Oh, John!" she whimpered. "They were so—dirty."

"I know, honey," he whispered, petting her shoulder. "It's all right now."

"The men," she went on, an almost hysterical note in her voice, "they weren't so mean. But the women . . . the way they looked at me. They threw things at me, John. They screamed in my face."

"You're all right now," he tried to soothe her.

"No!" she sobbed. She raised up, and screamed. John caught her in his arms.

"Quiet, damn it!" he growled. "They'll hear us and . . ."

"No, John. I can hear them! Oh, John!"

She screamed again. John slapped her roughly. She scratched his face. He slapped her again. Harder than before.

She stopped fighting. She fell against him. "Oh, I'm so sorry, John. Thank you."

"You couldn't help it," he said quickly. "Poor girl."

He pulled her down among the vines as three Indian braves came running toward the oak clump. John gripped his revolver tightly. They had heard Martha's screams! Well, he had a few shots. And one for Martha.

The braves circled around the oaks. Then, with a whoop, one of them bolted toward the camp. The other two followed.

There was more shouting from the camp. John guessed from the uproar that the red men had discovered the flight of their prisoner.

Now a few shafts of dawn were flitting over the clearing. John watched grimly. An Indian chief was orating in loud gutturals. There were blood-thirsty shouts. He saw a handful of braves race toward the lodge where Martha had been imprisoned. Their actions were unmistakable.

They were taking up the trail of their liberated captive!

John looked around him. It would be foolish to risk flight from the oak clump. Now daylight was coming in a relentless rush. They would be seen instantly if they left their vine-shrouded sanctuary.

He squatted among the vines. The Indian braves were running around in a circle, heads close to the ground, their guttural chatter floating up to him. He raised up again, and saw that order was being restored in the camp. The squaws had been quieted.

Why didn't the calvary come! Hadn't the lieutenant believed Pecos?

The searching Indians broke up into small parties. John watched in grim amusement. There was no such thing as a trail; the beating back and forth of frightened squaws and excited bucks had wiped that out. But the Indians knew they had not gone far. It was only a matter of time until their hiding place was found.

Martha pulled at John's arm. He knelt beside her.

"Do you have a gun for me?" she asked.

"No."

"They'll find us?" she asked after a moment. Her voice was calm; she might have been asking about the weather.

"Yes," he shrugged. "Sooner or later. But maybe . . ." and he told her about the calvary.

"I don't deserve to live through this, John," she whispered. Her voice shook a little; her body pressed against his, trembling. "I've been such a fool, John."

He put his left arm around her without taking his eyes off the Indians. Two trailing braves were now within a hundred yards of the oak clump. Full daylight would be here soon. Once the shadows had lifted from the oaks, any Indian would see at a glance that the vines had been trampled, and would guess that their quarry hid here.

"That's dust on the trail behind us," John said. "What we got to think about —is the trail ahead."

"To Wyoming," Martha said bitterly. "Do you think I'd go on, John . . . without you?"

John grinned. She couldn't see his face, else she might have been shocked by that grin. There was something of the devil-may-care about it, something of the swashbuckling pride that was more like Chase Mitchell than John Cannon.

"From now on," he said, *"I'll* pick the trails. For both of us."

THERE was a shout from one of the Indian trailers. No more than fifty yards from the clump he had found their trail. John pushed Martha away and shot quickly. There was a scream, and John chuckled as he dived deeper into the vines, pulling Martha after him.

There was the clatter and uproar of the camp again. John waited with pounding heart. It wouldn't be long now.

Then he heard another roar. Then, sharp and clear, came a thrilling sound.

"What's that?" Martha exclaimed.

John laughed. "A Yankee bugle."

"Bugle! John, the cavalry!"

"A Yankee bugle," he murmured again. "This isn't the first time I've heard it at dawn. But it never sounded so sweet before."

He gently disengaged himself from her embrace. "John, where are you going?" she demanded.

"I'm gonna be in on this," he grinned.

He ran out into the open. The bugle sounded again, and John saw the cavalry storming up the ridge in battle formation. Their blue uniforms looked dark and forbidding in this shivering light, but John had only delighted admiration for the picture they made. There was a rattle of gunfire from the surprised Indians.

Half the camp was in disorder. John took careful aim at a half-naked warrior who was pulling his protesting horse with one hand and clinging to his wailing squaw with another. The buck dropped, and the squaw's screamings were thin and high while the freed mustang turned around and bolted through the remnants of the camp. John picked another target. This one, he said grimly, was for Uncle Ike.

Now the cavalry was smashing through the camp. They had learned something from old Jeb Stuart, John chuckled. For half of the horsemen fanned out in two widening circles, sweeping stragglers back toward the center. Sabers glistened, and then were dull with blood. Damn Yankees, John grinned as he took aim on another warrior, you learned a lot about the saber after Bull Run.

Right through the camp charged one squadron, the young lieutenant himself at their head. Lodges were toppled over with splintering sounds. The squaws buried themselves in their wreckage with pitiful wailings.

The battle was grim, but short. The Indians were never in the fight, but many of them chose to die in battle rather than concede defeat.

JOHN led Martha toward the wrecked camp. Fires were built, water put on to boil, first aid being administered to wounded men, breakfast with steaming coffee being prepared. Only minutes had passed since the bugle had blown out its signal of victory, but already the battle lust had been replaced by quiet, calm efficiency.

The lieutenant was trying to bandage a wounded leg for a dark-bearded scowling trooper. With a little cry Martha Bell pushed him off and took over the job herself, yanking up her soiled dress and tearing a strip of white cloth from one of her petticoats.

The officer yielded with a sigh. John Cannon held out his hand.

"My thanks, sir," John said quietly. "And my congratulations to you, as one soldier to another. You're a credit to the uniform you wear."

"Thank you, sir," the lieutenant said a little stiffly. "Coffee will be ready in a minute. The boys had to leave without their breakfast this morning."

A trooper leaped up from the fire to hand the lieutenant coffee. "Have some, Cannon?" murmured the lieutenant.

Another trooper obligingly handed John a cup. The lieutenant kept stirring his. "Well," he said finally, "we got what we came after, Cannon."

"Yes?"

"Our orders," the officer added slowly, "were to bring back Coy dead or alive."

"Yes."

The lieutenant nodded in the direction of the brush where the Cheyennes had tethered their horses.

"He fought a war of his own over there," the West Pointer said gently. "There were five dead Cheyennes lying around him. They had to hack him to pieces . . . before he was through."

"I'm sure of that," John nodded. He twisted his big gnarled hands together. "I'm glad of that, lieutenant," he sighed. "It wouldn't do for you to . . . carry him in."

"No," was the prompt reply. The lieutenant smiled. "You did some shooting yourself, Cannon."

"I got a couple of 'em," John admitted.

"I don't want to rub an old wound, Cannon," said the officer, "but tell me one thing. How did we ever whip you rebels?"

John thought of Martha Bell's deep eyes and chuckled. "You couldn't have," he declared, "if our women had gone to war with us."

With a last desperate lunge his tomahawk flashed home.

FORT DEFIANCE

By R. J. BURROUGH

With screaming savages swarming up the walls and the smoke of betrayal in his nostrils, Jere Allen needed another heart behind him if he was to fight on. Was it there?

IT WAS JUST BEFORE DARK when Jere Allen reached his land, and stood in the shelter of the birch grove at the edge of the clearing. He was young, big and powerful. Thick dark hair, blue eyes keen as a fishhawk's, a band of freckles like a highwayman's mask over his blunt-rooted nose and a square cleft chin, made up a strong face, but one more used to hearty laughter than to frowning. He was sober enough now, however, as, rubbing a brown hand over his dark growth of beard, he studied the sturdy L of cabin and attached barn, and the three fiery maples which stood near the house, though not so close that from their

branches crouching Indians could drop to the cabin roof.

From the wide stone chimney a curl of smoke twisted up, the sharp woodsy smell mingling with the clean scent of blowing pines and firs. Everything seemed safe. He gave a clear, sweet whistle, twice repeated.

His mother opened the cabin door slowly, the evening breeze fingering the damp gray hair at her temples. She was a big woman with a kind, courageous face. "Any sign of 'em yet, Jere?" she called.

He crossed the clearing swiftly. "I went up as far as Gallant's trading post. He says no Injuns have been in since the drownin', but he saw one buck huntin' and he was daubed up for the red path. Gallant shouted to him that the drownin' was none of our doin' . . . that it was the new Agent's men who tossed the Injun woman and her baby into deep water to see if they could swim . . . but the buck didn't let on he heard."

She shook her head. "How could any humans act so cruel?"

Jere rested his musket against the wash bench under the apple tree and shucked off his pack harness. "The kind of idjuts, or worse, that Massachusetts Bay sent down here to rule us could do anything. Gallant says he's certain sure the new Agent, Peabody, is tradin' with the savages behind our backs, sellin' them those newfangled guns that fire ten times as fast as ours." He slapped the hogshead to drive the wigglers down. "Mistress Beldon still here?"

"Yes," his mother said as she went indoors. "And hurry, supper's most ready."

Jere groaned as he scooped soft soap from the jug. "Trouble always brings its mother . . . never comes alone." Mistress Beldon was an angry subject with him. She and her parents had arrived in the party of the new Agent, and those who had travelled declared her to be the most beautiful girl in the whole length of the colonies. The young men had been dazzled with her, but Jere was unimpressed. "She has the look of a spoiled piece," he had declared confidently. They had tried to shout him down, but he merely grinned.

He had not been so well pleased, however, when Mistress Beldon had come to live at his farm because her parents had been called home suddenly, and Jere's mother had been Mrs. Beldon's best friend years ago in London.

"She'll not turn a hand to help you, Ma," he warned. "She's no more use than a coot. It'll be a happy day when I see her heels."

His mother had said, unruffled, "Let things work out. She's a better girl than you give her credit for."

Jere stretched, knotting his powerful hands over his head, his eyes never for a moment unwatchful of the darkening clearing, for the constant threat hung over him of flaming Indian attack that in a few hours could wipe out all his hopes. It had happened to his father six years ago.

Jere's face darkened. He had not told his mother that Gallant had said that the same Indian, Paugus, who had led that raid, was now massing the savages for attack.

IN THE dim light Barbara Beldon came along the path from the house. She moved as gracefully as a cat, he had to admit. "Your mother said to tell you supper's ready." She was munching a wedge of hot corn bread with melting butter and jelly on it.

Jere sniffed . . . wild strawberry jelly. He reached out for it, but she slipped aside, cramming the whole into her mouth. She flashed buttery hands across his shirt, and, laughing, fled for the cabin.

Swooping up his musket and pack he leaped after her, but, fast as he was, for a short run she was quicker.

"Two feet more and I'd 'a' had you." Jere pulled up, breathing a bit faster. He was puzzled by her; this was a new tack. She was over her last sulking fit, but he didn't know that he liked this new mood any better. There was a note of mockery in her behavior that he didn't cotton to at all.

While the food was being carried to the table Jere went through the passageway connecting the house and barn, and made sure the livestock were securely penned against the night.

At last they all sat down at the narrow, candle-lighted table. The scent of bay-

berry filled the smoky room deep to the shifting shadows under the eaves.

"Bless us, O Lord, for these Thy..." Mrs. Allen rapped reprovingly; Jere and Barbara were eyeing each other thoughtfully.

They helped themselves to smoking succotash, hot corn bread, butter and wild jelly. Jere, resting the heavy jug on his forearm, poured their own clear cider, cooled down in the root cellar.

Faintly they heard the dull thudding of the cow's hoofs as Lady moved about in her stall. Two crickets in a crack beside the hearth kept chirping juicily *tsee, tsee, tsee.*

They were tired and did not speak much, even about the desperate affairs of the settlement. Suddenly, however, Jere said, "Ma, don't go too far from the house when I'm not here. It's not . . ."

"Son..." His mother stood up, scraping her dish into the keeler of scraps for the ducks. "...I was fighting savages two hours before you were born. Your father and little David were killed before my eyes. It may just be that I know a mite more about Injuns than you do." She chuckled. "Remember, big and strong as you are—the best shot and wrestler in these parts—you've never been in a battle. You've never let Injun blood."

Barbara stared at Jere. "He's never let Injun blood! Why, to hear him talk you'd swear he bathed in it." She gave a warm, delighted laugh. Jere, without bothering to answer her, started to carry his dishes to the wooden sink.

"Here, wasteful," she called, "don't forget your crumbs." Swiftly she scooped a handful from the bench where they had fallen between his legs, and cupped them into the dish.

He stared at her. It was the first work of any sort he had ever seen her do in this place.

"How womenfolk plague the young man, so full of his importance," Barbara went on. "And how red he grows around the ears!"

Jere thumped his dish down. For a moment he stood motionless; then he looked at his mother, who was watching him thoughtfully. He began to grin.

Out in the barn Lady began to bawl and trample about restlessly.

JERE turned quickly to the open window, peered out on the shadowy clearing. Like the stir of a cold wind, he felt the hair rise and tighten on his scalp. He reached quietly for the leather thong to draw the shutter closed. But he had been seen.

From the farthest edge of the corn patch crouching Indians sprang up as though out of the earth. The war whoop screamed through the forest. Howling like wolves, they plunged towards the cabin.

Jere had the shutter barred now. "Load the guns, Ma!" he roared over Barbara's scream of terror. He blew out the candle; only the flickering glare of the fire remained. With a quick blow on the hearthstone he primed his musket, fired through the knothole of the door. The crash of the gun blotted out his mother's cry, "How many of them?"

"The woods are crawlin' with 'em!" He passed back the smoking musket, reached for the one she had loaded.

The cabin was ringed with crazy yells. There was a clawing, scraping sound on the roof. Jere raced to fling a basketful of chips into the fire; flames roared up the chimney. "You won't get down that way, you devils!"

His mother, desperately loading the muskets, cried, "What of the Freetheys and Diamants?"

"If they haven't been caught they'll hear the firing and make for the settlement."

The howling sounded almost in the cabin. Hacking tomahawks chopped at the thick planking of the door.

Jere shouted through the smoke, "There's too many of 'em! Ma, you two get into the settlement. I'll hold 'em off as long as I can." He fired again and peered through the knothole. "Hurry, Ma!" he cried thickly. He had seen the savage directing the attack, Paugus, the Indian who had tomahawked Jere's father. "By the escapeway! *Hurry.*"

His mother gathered quickly what she would save, while Barbara, her face sick with fear, stood rooted at the table. Through the uproar outside, they heard the thin screams of the pigs and the frenzied bawling of Lady as their throats were slit.

"Go now!" Jere cried harshly.

"Quick, Barbara!" His mother tried to push Barbara towards the cellarway.

"I'll stay here," Barbara cried in a voice they could hardly hear. "He needs help. I can load the muskets, I can—"

His mother looked at her. "He'll be all right," she said. She opened the trap door to the cellar. Then with one quick glance at Jere, a glance that mixed love and fear, she seized the girl in strong hands. "Don't wait too long, son! Come quickly, Barbara."

"No fear I'll wait too long," he said. Then he was alone, firing, reloading desperately, yelling with rage as he darted from one side of the cabin to the other, wherever the attack seemed most vicious. The room swirled with choking smoke; he had to grope for the powder and balls on the table. Every shot he made reechoed from the cabin's walls, added to the cloud of smoke inside. His hands were steady now, in spite of the bedlam of screams, the deadly chop-chop of axes against the walls he had built.

Suddenly, the blade of a tomahawk crashed through the door. Jere sprang to a corner knothole, fired into the struggling mass in front of the door. Again, he glimpsed the lean dark face of Paugus.

Another tomahawk blade slid between the logs as though through butter. The shutters were splintering. Jere knew he dared wait no longer. Coughing, he scooped up all his bullets and powder, and his six iron nails, so rare in the colony that they were treasure. He ran across the dark, smoke-filled room and swung down the ladder into the chill of the root cellar. The trap dropped over his head; he shot the bolt and then groped to the escapeway. The ground above his head beat with trampling feet; dust rained down on him, threatening a cave-in. Racing, he careened blindly from one wall to the other, blundering over loose rocks which had not been removed.

The passage ended at last in the family burying ground. Cautiously he came blinking up into the dark night. There was no sign of danger; the frenzied yells from his clearing were dimmed by distance. He ran down the black path to the shore. Only his own canoe remained; his mother and Barbara must have got off safely.

He shot away from the shore, leaving a wide wake. Then he caught the smell of smoke, sharp and acrid, and realized that the savages had fired his cabin. He groaned his fury, "You devils—you devils, you'll pay for this!" and his eyes blazed in his smoke-blackened face.

Ahead, in the distance, he saw the Diamants' canoes, loaded with children and squawking chickens, paddles bending under the desperate haste of Denny's and the boys' strokes.

From the settlement came the faint bellowing of the cowhorn, the summons rolling across forest and bay, calling all into Pemmasaco.

JERE swooped around the last bend and shot into shore. Carrying his canoe, he scrambled through the thick grass to the small side gate of the stockade. From up on the parapet men shouted at him, "How many of 'em, Jere? Where are the devils?"

"Too many to count. Did my folks get in safe?"

"They're safe." The gate was whipped open for him. He edged his canoe in, and the heavy bar dropped into place. The stockade bristled with defenders, busy with their muskets. Women who could handle guns stood ready to load—and fire, if need be.

Ben Jordan, rolling a keg of powder up to the wall, shouted to him. "Cap'n wants you, Jere."

"Right." There was no need to ask where Winslow was. The Captain, bellowing like an enraged bull, was shouting orders to the runners. A big man, ready for action, Winslow was stripped to shirt and breeches, extra pistols thrust into his waistband. "Tell the King's Agent to send all his men here to me . . .bring their newfangled guns . . . all the shot and powder they got."

Jere cached his canoe in a cornfield and ran towards Winslow. He skirted the herd of bawling cattle being driven to the pens under the blockhouse. They lunged ahead, udders swinging, great clods of mud flying from their pounding hoofs.

"Cap'n!" Jere shouted.

Winslow swung around. "How close are they? How many?"

"Seems like hundreds. And Paugus is leadin' 'em."

"I was expectin' so," Winslow growled. "They'll be tricky, for certain. There's—" He broke off to call to a young boy stumbling with a keg of powder. "Take it easy, lad. Plenty of time."

A watcher in the tower peered anxiously towards the dark woods. "I...saw... something move, Cap'n. I think they're here," he cried.

An arrow whizzed over the stockade walls. A piece of bark came unrolled from its shaft. *Surrender,* it read, *or we will chop you into pieces small as tobacco.*

"The devil you will," Winslow snarled. "Here, send this message back to them: *Why does Paugus send his women to fight us? Where are his men?* Tie that to their blasted arrow and shoot it back to them."

Wild wolf howls from the forest on three sides of the settlement told that the message had been received, and that Pemmasaco was surrounded on all but the bay side, but there was no assault beyond a flight of arrows that dropped harmlessly within the walls.

Suddenly shouts of dismay and fury swept along the stockade. The uproar grew.

"What the devil now?" Winslow demanded.

The report swept up like wildfire. "The agent, Peabody, and his men have slipped out! They've got a safe conduct from the savages to pass through their lines!"

Cursing, Winslow cried, "They'd never dare! They'd never—"

A runner panted up. "Peabody and his men have gone, Cap'n, every hair and hide of 'em."

Winslow's grip tightened on his pistols. He looked at his men, cursing with rage. "That won't do the job, boys," he shouted. "They've left us! Everything depends on us alone, now. But those guns . . ." he groaned ". . . the savages will take every gun from 'em and turn 'em on us."

A sudden thought struck Jere. What of Barbara? Had she left with them? "Hey, Ned," he grabbed a keeler boy, scurrying past. "Get to the blockhouse fast, and find out if Mistress Beldon went with the others."

He was frowning, and there was a strange feeling in him when the boy raced back with the word, "She didn't go with 'em. She's at the blockhouse with your mother."

Now Indian campfires were springing up among the black pines, like fireflies on a hot July night. Soon a deep, glaring semicircle of fire hemmed Pemmasaco by land.

Inside the settlement the men made preparations to sleep at their posts. Fires were kindled and night watchers moved around them. Though the cabins were dark, slits of light beneath the heavy shutters told that few were asleep. Dim figures carrying spitting torches hurried through the narrow lanes.

Around one fire, Jere, Ben Jordan, Aaron Winslow, Denny Diamant and others of the young men stretched out, firelight flickering over their lean faces.

"What do you figure the Injuns are up to, Jere?" Aaron asked quietly. He rolled over on his stomach, listening to the steady noise of chopping that came from the forest and the rushing roar of falling trees.

Ben looked up from the wood sliver he had been whittling to plug into his musket where the butt had been hit. "They're makin' batterin' rams."

Jere squinted at him across the crackling flames. He swallowed the last of the squash pie he had brought from the tables, brushed the crumbs from his hands. "Those are small trees falling. They'd be no good for rams. They'd buckle the instant they hit the gates."

"And there's too many of 'em," Diamant said hoarsely, his dark, gaunt face sinister in the leaping red light. "They'd have no need of more than five or six for the big gate, two for the little ones. I've counted more than eighty falling."

The steady chopping continued, now near, then farther away. At a nearby fire one of the older men stirred the logs for better draft. "With Paugus leadin' 'em, it's some devil trick, count on it!" he shouted over.

Jere turned over on his side as though through with talk and pulled up his blanket. As he stared at the stars his thoughts were . . . could he protect his mother and Barbara?

DURING the long night the crackling fires flared and died and leaped again under the fresh wood thrown on them by the tenders. Towards dawn there was

a stirring in the darkness inside the settlement. The leaders went among their men. "All right, boys, on your feet." The fires were kicked apart so that only occasional flaring bits of ember lighted the half-dark.

The women carried great trenchers of hot food from the blockhouse, their way lighted by boys with snapping pine torches. Jere's mother searched for him. "Take care of yourself now," she warned, spooning him a dish of hot corn meal and cream.

Barbara was with her; her eyes sought him out. Jere laughed, showing much less concern than he felt. "Do you watch out. There's as much danger for you as for me."

His mother said nothing, her eyes following him as he swung up the spikes to the parapet. The best marksmen were on the parapet; those less good were at the knotholes below.

Jere hunched down, his musket ready, tomahawk and war club thrust into his belt. From all sides in the foggy gray mist came the sounds of men coughing, the rattle of bullet pouches, the rumble of powder kegs.

SUDDENLY it was daybreak. A wide band of crimson stretched over the sky beyond the bay. Ground haze lay thick over the open space between the stockade and forest.

"I'd like to see that burn away quick," Jere muttered uneasily.

"Watch lively," Winslow warned. "They'll come any minute. Don't let 'em get close. Pick 'em off soon's you get a clean shot."

The haze cleared slowly; they saw the forest. But they saw, too, what seemed to be a carpet of scarlet and yellow and green sweeping towards the stockade . . . young saplings borne on the shoulders of running warriors, carried so close together that their flaming leaves shielded the savages.

A yell broke from the defenders as they realized what this meant . . . they could not see the Indians, and to fire into the onrushing mass of foliage would be only to waste precious shot.

"They'll get safe up to the walls! Get ready for hand to hand! You men at the knotholes blast 'em!" Winslow raged. "Blast 'em!"

Jere seized his tomahawk and war club and laid them at his feet, ready.

The ground shook with the thud of pounding feet. The shield of trees crashed against the stockade.

"Let 'em have it, boys!"

Guns belched flame along the whole wall.

The savages let the trees drop. They sprang up, an army rising from a colored sea. Howling, they struggled to scale the walls through the crashing smoke, mounting one upon the other.

The first shaved heads topped the walls.

Jere crashed his war club down on a painted face. Screaming, the Indian toppled backward like a dead bird. On the narrow parapet the defenders swung clubbed muskets, shifting their footing with desperate agility. Below them the fighters fired through knotholes into the writhing mass of savages leaping to mount the wall. They thrust their blazing musket barrels into glaring faces or smashed clutching hands that groped for the top of the logs.

Jere was conscious only of those on either side of him, Sev Tucker, and Denny Diamant roaring like a madman, cursing, calling on the saints for help. At every savage Denny smashed back over the parapet he yelled, "That's for Molly. That's for young Denny. That's for Peggy," down the line of his children. When one huge, clawing savage nearly scrambled over the stockade top Denny cried, "This one for meself!" as his musket split the Indian's skull.

"We're holding 'em," Jere cried, his breath wheezing through cracked lips.

There was no slackening in the attack. From the forest came the firing of snaphances, guns firing ten shots to the settlers' one. Jere had no time to reload now. He twisted his musket through his shoulder harness. Feet planted wide apart, he whirled his tomahawk and war club. Fighting savagely, he smashed at shaven heads.

There was no sign of Paugus among the attackers.

Jere's arms were growing heavy. The line holding the blazing parapet was thinner; the savages still swept at them relentlessly.

Suddenly Ben Tucker shouted in horror, "Look over there! The filthy devils!"

Savages capering out of the forest waved muskets crowned by gory scalps.

"The agent and his men! Cap'n, they scalped Peabody an' his men!"

Through the smoke Winslow bellowed, "What'd the fools expect?" He was everywhere, speeding his meagre reserves at the double quick to any threatened spot. Dom Pruitt toppled backward from the parapet, clutching at an arrow that quivered in his chest. Winslow shouted, "Up with you, Dow! Take his place!"

A runner came gasping towards him. "They've got over. They're over the walls on Peeble's side!"

WINSLOW roared, "Peeble's men 'a' given way! We've got to fall back. You men on the parapet drop down! Make for the blockhouse. Fight 'em every inch. Don't let 'em get behind you!" Rallying his men, he kept shouting, "Watch for Paugus! He'll come into the open now. Get him!"

Yelling, Jere and those around him plunged to the ground. He scrambled to his feet, facing the walls over which the savages were already pouring, howling.

Tucker was on his left, Denny Diamant on his right. Shoulder to shoulder they faced the swarming savages. There was no more firing for the settlers. It was hand to hand now, falling back swiftly, keeping a thin, unbroken line against the hordes that swept after them. Whooping, howling, the savages pursued them as they gave ground doggedly between the cabins, through the corn patches.

"Try for Paugus!" Winslow panted. "If we can only get him . . . !"

Jere heard the order but he was already in a death struggle with two snarling savages, his tomahawk flashing and parrying. Once he hurled it in a gleaming arc, swooped quickly to wrench it free before the other savage could leap over his fallen comrade. His face was streaming blood.

Diamant, roaring defiance beside him as he smashed away with his heavy war club, crushing his foe's head. Suddenly, "Watch out, Jere!" Denny shouted. He chopped hastily at a savage who was creeping up under cover of the struggling group.

"Keep falling back, lads!" Winslow barked. "Don't let 'em get behind you!"

They dropped back faster. From the blockhouse the bellows of frightened cattle mingled with the cries of the dying and wounded. The smell of blood and char and burning hay choked them; they saw through a haze.

Jere stumbled back faster; the thin line was breaking. He had finished the two who had set out after him; his eyes searched desperately for Paugus.

Writhing savages who had fallen, chopped at the legs of the retreating settlers. From every side came the screams of the wounded, cries that ended abruptly, finished by the bloodstained braves who slipped among the burning cabins, shaking dripping trophies.

The blockhouse was near. Trying to cover the retreat of their men, the women fired from the upper story. Jere heard the familiar crash of his mother's old gun as she fired at an Abenaki pursuing him —the savage fell.

Jere felt that the end was near as he stumbled beneath the shelter of the overhanging upper story. The fort could hold out against this attack only a short while.

The heavy door of the blockhouse was open; the men staggered into its shelter while the howling savages pressed them relentlessly.

Panting, Jere pressed towards the door; he was one of the last.

Then, suddenly, for the first time, he saw Paugus close. The chief was shielded only by a fringe of madly capering Abenakis. Jere stood still. Sudden rage at all that this savage had done swept over him. He felt no fear or weariness. With a wild cry that cut through the howls and shrieks of the bloody day, he sprang.

Paugus saw him at the same instant. Teeth bared, the savage swung his dripping hatchet for the death blow. But the strength of Jere's leap threw him off-balance for a second. The savages slipped behind Jere, cutting him off, but they could not come to the aid of a chief. Hacking, slashing, feinting, Jere struggled madly. Paugus' gold armband glittered in his reddened eyes. Through the bedlam he heard Winslow's desperate cry, "Fight, men! Make our last stand here. Fight for our lives!"

The fury of the battle quickened again. Jere and the chief strained body to body, leaping over the huddled figures of the dead and wounded, half seen in the swirling smoke, the glare of burning haystacks.

Jere fought madly on, drenched with sweat, flinging all his tremendous strength into the struggle. But he had never fought so strong, so wary an opponent. Hot blood flowed along his arm from a tomahawk gash.

Clear through the thundering confusion came Winslow's hoarse cry, "Fight, Jere, fight!"

Jere gathered all his strength; it was now or never. With a last desperate lunge he was for an instant under Paugus' guard. His tomahawk flashed home. He sprawled over the toppling body of the savage.

Through the wild shrieking, Winslow straddled Jere. Bellowing and swinging clublike fists, he roared, "Paugus is dead! Your chief is dead. Run, ye yellow-livered varmints! Run!"

The terrible cry winged through the milling savages. "Paugus is slain!" Then men poured from the blockhouse, surging forward in a relentless wave of blood and fury. The Abenakis held for a moment; then suddenly they broke. Howling, they fled through the glare from the burning cabins.

"Drive 'em out! Faster, men!" The settlers pursued, stumbling, through char-filled smoke.

Through the hazy lanes, past flaming haystacks and crackling cabins the beaten Abenakis swept in flight, leaping over their slain. Through the main gate and out over the hacked stockade they poured. The steady fire of the settlers caught them, tossing them grotesquely. One savage, hit, crouched over, leaving a trail of blood, his knotted hand sweeping the blue asters as he pitched to the ground. Finally, the last wave of them melted into the forest.

At the stockade gate Winslow cried, "Let 'em go, boys. They've got a bellyful. Come back—we've got to try to save our homes!"

BY LATE afternoon the fires were licked, but many cabins were blistered ruins. The graveyard on the hill had been opened, and now the long lines of dead were borne there to common graves.

Around Winslow the survivors were gathered as he read out the prayers in a voice so hoarse he could hardly whisper. The wind drifted the scarlet and yellow leaves over the raw earth; it carried the thin wailing of children.

Jere stood with the other young men who had carried the hacked bodies of their friends here to the burying ground. Leaning on his musket, his throbbing arm wrapped in blood-stained cloths, he felt drained of all strength. He had taken no joy in the words of praise for his battle with Paugus that had turned the tide and saved the settlement—he knew every man had fought to the limit—all deserved the praise.

His mother stood among the women, with Barbara beside her. He looked at Barbara, and a sudden hot feeling of pride leaped in him—she alone, of all her people had stayed with them.

Tired as they were, the young men seemed as eager as ever to please her. Jere moved protectingly towards her—no need to let the lads annoy the girl.

The Captain began to speak of the future. "The savages won't be back for more in a hurry. The possessions of the agent and his followers are forfeit, share and share alike in proportion to each family's loss. Now we're our own masters once more. We must build again, this time uniting with our sister settlements for common defense. When Massachusetts Bay comes back, and come she will, we must be joined against unfair rule. Now the scouts say the Abenakis have fled inland; those who live outside the walls are free to go."

Jere went to his mother and Barbara. "We'll start now."

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

IRON RIDER

By CARL HORN

The Indians were rising and Courier Pearson leaped into his saddle to spread the alarm. Pony after pony fell under his fierce whip, but Bill Pearson rode on—into history!

INSCRUTABLY GRAVE, the buckskin clad express rider packed his saddle bags with emergency rations and official dispatches at Olympia, Washington Territory. He swung one farewell glance down the dusty street, lined with log cabins and raw frame buildings, knowing full well that no one else in the tiny territorial capital thought he could get through the suddenly hostile Indian country, to his chief in Fort Benton, Montana.

Almost two thousand miles of rock-ribbed mountains and golden plains cut with countless tumultous streams, lay between W. H. Pearson and the endangered governor, Isaac I. Stevens. But if Pearson could not reach him in time, Stevens and his party of aides and packers were certain to ride into slaughter, quite possibly torture, as they crossed the Bitter Root range of the Rockies westward to enter the Walla Walla Valley.

In that valley Pearson knew Chief

"Kill the white man! Kill the white!"

Kamiakin had sworn to have one thousand painted Yakima warriors to cut down the returning "white chief who talked so big." Through that valley Pearson must ride eastward alone, to warn Stevens. No time remained for a detour through trackless mountains. A day, perhaps a few hours, could be fatal to the most vital mission of the trusted express rider . . .

Too often mention of the pony expressmen of the Old West refers only to the couriers of the famous but short-lived firm of Russell, Majors, and Waddell, whose bold riders made incredible time across tremendous stretches of country, carrying letters at five dollars a half-ounce. W. H. Pearson rode a different, but no less heroic, kind of express.

For years before and after the storied Pony Express, the services of men like Pearson were necessary to military and territorial authorities to carry messages, reports, and letters of instruction. The route lay from man to man, wherever he might be in the wilderness. Getting the leather pouches through depended upon the expressman's knowledge of the country and its Indians, his own horsemanship and personal stamina. Always he held his life in his own hands.

A native Philadelphian, Pearson deserted the city pavements early. In 1855 he was the indispensable aide of the territorial governor, who was also the superintendent of Indian affairs. Already Pearson had been seasoned as Texas Ranger, Scout, Indian fighter, and express rider, ranging the Indian-infested frontier from the Rio Grande to the 49th parallel.

Of small, well-knit frame, the man's muscles and thick chest filled out his fringed leather shirt. His waving chestnut hair, high fair forehead and mild manner had set more than one Indian at ease. For the pleasant face beneath the weathered hat brim belied the tough fiber of the man within . . .

GALLOPING on down the green Cowlitz valley in early October, toward the Columbia River, Pearson drove two loose horses ahead of him, as was his custom. Before his mount tired he flung his saddle over a fresh animal. A mental map of the western country, a sense of direction and of danger matching any Indian's, were sharp in his mind. Usually he knew where to procure fresh horses, fodder, and rest. But if the Indians were on the warpath as rumor insisted, any old standby might now be an ambush.

Man for man, no Indian daunted him. From long experience Pearson knew a skilled frontiersman could excell the most wily Indian in stamina, woodsmanship, physical strength, and intellect. It was surprise he feared, the treachery in numbers. To date the Indian had been his friend, cowed by respect for his superior skill with the lariat, his superb horsemanship, and the hardihood so frequently demonstrated in past weeks.

Barely sixteen weeks before, at Walla Walla on June 14th, 1855, Pearson had fastened Governor Stevens' hurriedly written reports in his saddle bags. Before the treaty-making Indians there had broken camp, the expressman had sped miles on his way down the Columbia en route to Olympia.

While Pearson galloped west, Stevens and his mounted party had traveled north and east for further treaty-making. Having visited the Coeur d'Alene mission, the governor crossed the Bitter Root range of the Rockies to Hell Gate, Montana. As Stevens concluded a treaty with the Flatheads there, on July 18th, his tireless expressman rode serenely into camp. In thirty-four days, Pearson acknowledged with modest pride, he had delivered his dispatches at the capital, repacked his pouches with communications, and rejoined the governor, a fifteen hundred-mile trip.

Next morning Pearson swung into the saddle to carry reports of the Coeur d'Alene and Flathead councils west to Olympia. As he exchanged horses at Lapwai, Idaho, on this trip, Pearson recalled, his suspicions of danger first were aroused. The hitherto friendly Nez Percés hinted that other tribes, treaty-bound to friendship by the June council, were now restive, urging war to exterminate the white men. The Yakimas, Cayuses, and Walla Wallas were said to have boasted that they would never live on the reservations assigned to them.

Pearson himself noted that the plains Indians were swarming like angry bees.

Small bands of surly warriors popped up at unexpected places. He missed the usual encampments of the food-gathering fall season. Needing remounts, he was forced to rope a wandering horse. Losing riding time, he cursed as he fought with the wild pony.

Riding in to Olympia, he sensed the vague fear of Indian uprising haunting the scattered coastal settlements. Blockhouses had been built as a precaution against the now overbearing Siwash. Once more Pearson pounded over the trail east, to find Stevens at Fort Benton on August 27th, preparing for the council with the fierce Blackfeet.

The expressman's official communications reported all yet quiet and favorable west of the mountains; also that many miners and settlers were swarming into the upper country of Eastern Washington. Lust for the gold discovered on the Columbia near Colville had tempted the white man. The short way to the diggings lay across Indian land, whose owners were protesting trespass.

Still Stevens expected to be home again before any trouble could occur. Pearson rode west on the third return while Stevens continued with the ceremonious Blackfoot council.

But the fleet expressman found only threat in the countryside. The Indians hurried their fall hunting, fishing, and berry-picking. Head men talked in each other's lodges. Traveling bands met en route were suspiciously silent, refusing to trade horses. News current at the Dalles military post was the raw report of the murder of six white miners, bound through Yakima Indian country toward the gold diggings. His fear for Stevens' safety grew.

While he reported in Olympia, a courier galloped in with the news of the brutal slaying of Sub-Agent A. J. Bolon. Pretending good will, three Yakimas had slit the throat of a man well-known to them as a friend. The lid of the boiling kettle was off.

Pearson packed his saddle bags, determined to get through hell or high water to Stevens with the alarm. Reaching the Columbia Gorge, he lit out east for The Dalles ferry as if the devil were after him. Fresh and well-mounted next morning, he left the lively post to ride hard all day and night, heading for Billy McKay's ranch on the Umatilla River. The popular half-breed stockman should know the lay of the Walla Walla valley. But his ranch house was rifled and deserted. Pearson knew instantly that the Indians were making good their threats. He had begun a ride for his own life, as well as for that of Stevens.

Yet his horses were exhausted. He swallowed his breakfast ration, and selected a fine-looking horse from the stragglers of McKay's herd, grazing in the bunch grass. But the animal turned out to be unbroken. Anxiously Pearson scanned the surrounding hills. When he got a saddle on the heavy horse, it persisted in jumping stiff-legged instead of walking. By fits and starts he guided it out from under the trees around the house.

And then his heart stood still.

THE THUMP of unshod hooves sounded in the distance. Over the rim of the little valley plunged a wild party of naked Indian bucks, evidently on his trail.

Discovering him, the Indians screeched, "Whup si-ah poo! Whup siah!" ("Kill the white man! Kill the white!"), as they lashed cruelly at their ponies.

Pearson's flesh crept along his backbone. He dug his spurs into his jerking steed and laid on the whip. Startled, the large horse gave over his stubborn gait and broke suddenly into a swift gallop up the trail, northeastward out of the valley. For a moment the rider breathed easier. On the ridge he looked back to see the redskins in hot pursuit. His nerves drew taut. For mile after mile, from the top of every ridge and roll of plain crossed by the trail, Pearson looked back to see the Indians after him.

But the savages could not gain upon him. Gradually the distance between them widened. At last they were lost to sight. But he dared not slow up. All day long he pushed the fine horse as rapidly as it could stand. When it was dark, he turned off the trail at right angles for several miles, then struck a course as near parallel to it as he could. His heart in his mouth, he traveled cautiously all night through the dangerous Walla Walla valley

where he had heard the Yakimas lay in wait, one thousand strong, to ambush and murder Governor Stevens.

Fording the Walla Walla River above the usual crossing he raced on until he found a naturally protected basin in the sunburnt plains. Hobbling his horse, he allowed it to graze while he dropped exhausted, to rest for two hours. Stiff and sore, Pearson then rode on to Red Wolf's camp of always-friendly Nez Percés on the Alpowa. Trading his blown horse for a fresh pinto, he pushed on toward Lapwai that afternoon.

Finding the Nez Percés at the misssion still friendly, he slept the sun around in an Indian lodge. He knew he must cross the Rockies by the nearest route. But he did not know the direct Indian track, the famed Lolo Trail, shortest but also the most rugged and elevated mountain crossing in the United States.

Finally he persuaded the Indians to lend him horses and a young Nez Percé as guide through the mountains. A fear that Stevens might be missed en route clutched at his heart. By dark they were able to make camp high up in the mountains. Bad luck dogged them. An early but furious snowstorm broke loose and raged on for three days, burying the trail, and disguising all landmarks. Sub-zero temperatures held through the nights. Still unbeaten, Pearson bided his shortening time making snowshoes. He cut the bows from a hardwood bush and unraveled part of his lariat to weave the web. When the snow ceased falling, two feet of it lay on the ground, too deep for horses to travel.

Even so, he must go on. The expressman packed his dispatches, blankets, and a little dried meat on his back. After starting the Nez Percé back toward Lapwai with the horses, he struggled on alone in the high altitude and cold for four days. He was able to guide himself on the snow-covered trails by marks of packs in the bark of trees, previously made by Indians crossing in winter.

Staggering out into the Bitter Root valley, Pearson hiked doggedly on toward Fort Owen, known to be deserted in the winter except for Flatheads, still friendly, he hoped. Arriving exhausted by fatigue and privation, he found the Indians willing to share meagre winter rations. A few hours' rest began to revive his determination to push on. Supplied with a good horse, the half-dead man began the last two hundred sixty miles of his unwavering dash for Fort Benton.

As he had feared, Stevens' party already was under way. But three days later, October 29th, he spied the light of their campfires on the banks of the Teton River, thirty-five miles west of the fort. Pearson had ridden seventeen hundred fifty miles in twenty-eight days. During the last three days without rest or change of mount, he had eaten only berries and a raw fish.

At the limit of his strength, the lone horseman rode out of the wilderness toward the camp, which was cheerfully bedding down in the chill twilight. Bearded, bedraggled, and emaciated, he hunched over in his saddle. His pony stumbled and staggered like an old nag.

He knew Stevens' men stared at his sorry appearance, unable to recognize him, but he could give no hail. Suddenly they leaped to their feet shouting, "It's Pearson, the expressman!" as they scrambled out to help in the gaunt messenger.

But Pearson was too weak to talk at all, and Stevens opened his dispatches for news. When massage, rest, and warm food had revived the famished man, he awoke hearing the roar of Stevens' derisive laughter. The Western Indians were crying for the blood of all whites in the Northwest, especially for the dark scalp of Stevens himself, the dispatch read. Military authorities urged Stevens to go down the Missouri River and return to Olympia by way of Panama and San Francisco.

Over the snow-barred mountain passes the party returned, but forewarned and forearmed. By adroitness and unexpected moves, suggested by Pearson's information, Stevens was able to conciliate doubtful tribes, and evade all others, arriving at Olympia unharmed two months later.

Pearson's ride had saved them.

He stumbled down the steps and sprawled in the dust.

CROSS MY TRAIL AND DIE!

By SHELDON WILLS

Somewhere in the tall plains grass ahead of his plodding mules, Lee Reavis knew there lay a crooked, slimy path. And when he crossed it, guns would flame . . .

AUGUST HEAT HAD LAID ITS scorch on the passengers of the *City of Omaha* during the boat's run up the river from Kansas City. When it swung its bow from the channel to angle cautiously in to the landing there was an impatient push forward by those massed on the decks.

The tall, florid man, who had maneuvered a place just behind the girl in the blue dress with the square-cut glass buttons cascading down the front of its basque, noted every time his light blue eyes slid over her that she was young and slim without being thin. He had a high-colored face and his blond mustache flowed over red, full lips.

Another tall man, separated from the girl by the bulk of a perspiring fattish man, noted her too. He had seen her for the first time at supper on board the night before. She was not beautiful, but hers was an arresting face. The eyes were the bluest he had ever seen and the lips quirked upward from a generous, expressive mouth. She was, he judged, in her early twenties, but there was a certain dignity in her bearing, tinged now with a perceptible impatience at the slow berthing of the steamer.

The boat slowed for a moment, then warped in to the landing, bringing a shift in the passengers. The big blond man let the movement carry his shape up

against the girl and for a little the two were wedged in the crowd. At this the girl turned her head and distaste showed in the blue eyes.

The other tall man murmured something and suddenly the fat man was no longer between him and the girl. He took the blond man's hard, resentful stare with a vague feeling of having seen him before and lifted his broad-brimmed black hat to the girl. "It is very hot and crowded. You will find more room forward."

BEFORE she could protest, the girl found herself occupying a space that put the shapes of three passengers between them, and the florid man found himself facing a pair of broad shoulders and the tanned skin of a muscular neck.

A boat hand's voice bulled above the run of voices. Almost at once passengers began to flow down the gangplank, taking the girl in their flood and leaving the two tall men the last to file down to shore. Aside from their being about the same height and perhaps a year or two over thirty, the two had little in common.

Herman Zuder, the florid man, returning on the *City of Omaha* from Kansas City, had made no secret of the fact that since Antietam he had been doing a trading business with the forts and the settlers between Omaha and Fort McPherson.

Lee Reavis, preceding the other down the gangplank, was perhaps a half-inch taller than Zuder. He was a man of big and solid build with a bold nose that went well with a good line of jaw smooth from the razor. His mouth had a firmness that, even with a sort of dry humor in its corners, gave him a look of strong temper, checked by a strong will. There was a force in him which men felt and which some men resented. He had taken a musket ball in the shoulder at Petersburg and, after Appomattox, had come west as had so many others to carve out a new future.

It had been his careless indifference toward Zuder that had quickened the man's antagonism. Once on the landing, the trader watched Reavis holding his hand luggage and looking about for a conveyance. Zuder's questing glance had already discovered that the girl had gone, and that there was no vehicle available. He shifted his own luggage and said, with a certain satisfaction, "Have to walk, I guess."

"Looks like it."

The two dipped their boots in the streak of dust and chuckholes at the beginning of Farnam Street. A surrey, pulled by two satin-coated bays, sprinkled dust upon them in passing. Under the surrey's fringed top three curvaceous, elaborately dressed young women advertised the opulence of their physical charms. Zuder's full lips showed slack for a moment as he stared after them.

He said with a tilt of his head toward the surrey, "Been down to see the boat come in."

Reavis said, "I suppose so," and lengthened his stride.

The trader also lengthened his. "Where there's women like them, there's money." He looked at Reavis with veiled conjecture in his pale eyes. "Omaha will be rolling in it some day and, if men've got money, there's always somebody smart enough to get some of it. They say Ed Creighton made sixty thousand on one freight haul."

"Yes?" Reavis moved a little faster.

"I'll get my share. I always have." Zuder's stride matched the other's, and that look of conjecture was in his eyes again.

Something in the man's voice touched a chord of memory and Reavis looked full at the other. His vague feeling of having seen the man before became certainty. "You always managed to as a sutler, Zuder. That mustache fooled me. And then—it's been some time."

The trader's pale eyes showed malice before he said, "You're quick, Captain. You were always quick. I haven't forgotten—"

"I don't mind a man's getting his share, Zuder, but I couldn't stand for the men paying three prices. That's water under the bridge now." Reavis gave attention to his surroundings.

Ox-drawn Conestoga wagons of pilgrims and freighters crawled through the dust. Riders swerved in and out at a reckless gallop. Soldiers in blue with the yellow stripe of the cavalry on their breeches, men wearing jackets of Con-

federate gray above jeans and blanketed Indians moved in the hot sunlight. Chickens squawked miraculous escapes from hooves and wheels. Two white-spotted pigs thrust snouts into street refuse.

On the rise of ground above the first bottom, the wide dust narrowed to flow between wood sidewalks and wood awnings fronting entrances to saloons and business houses of the town. On a building that stood out above the others Reavis noted a sign: HERNDON HOUSE. He moved through the dust toward the hotel, as if to part from Zuder and so dismiss him from his life. In this he was wrong.

Reaching the Herndon House Reavis stopped. "Well, this is where our roads go different ways."

Zuder put down his hand luggage. "I couldn't say."

"It's a pretty big country."

The trader said deliberately, "But we're both in it." He brought his hostility out in the open. "In this country trails cross each other. I haven't forgotten, Captain. I don't forget quick. You've stepped in where you had no call more than once."

Reavis' look rode the other. Along with his running Zuder, as sutler, out of the army camp, the incident on the boat came into his mind. "All that was part of the war. It's over. I hold nothing against you now. There is no need for our roads to cross."

A spark glowed and went out in the trader's eyes. "All roads cross the Oregon Trail. It won't pay to get too tall out here, Captain."

Reavis crowded down an angry impatience and said reasonably enough, "I'll try to keep on my side."

"Sometimes a man might want the whole road," Zuder told him. He picked up the telescope bag at his feet and crossed the dust toward the false front of a building upon which was lettered: FRONTIER TRADING CO.

THE HERNDON HOUSE, at the corner of Ninth and Farnam, was Omaha's largest hotel in the sixties. Now it was the political and military center of the town.

It was this hotel into which Reavis turned now. Behind him minced a paunchy man wearing a straight-brimmed stovepipe hat. Under it, the round, full cheeks, laced red by the heat, vanished under sandy Burnside whiskers. The man's pompous carriage and opulent dress suggested he was of importance.

He was close behind Reavis at the hotel desk when the latter took up the pen to register. Reavis was saying to the mustached clerk, "A single room, a—" when the paunchy individual thrust his bulk unceremoniously in between.

"A room," demanded the newcomer in a high, petulant voice. "Large and well ventilated. Your damned climate is unbearable. Unbearable! I am Mr. Wilkes. Mr. Thaddeus Wilkes, representing the federal government."

The high voice carried. A smooth-shaven, firm-lipped man, talking to a big man with hair like the thickly curled hide of a buffalo, bent dark eyes upon the speaker and then let his look slant at Reavis.

The room clerk, gauging the importance of hotel guests by their outward habiliments, moved his moustache up and down in a conciliatory smile at Reavis. "If you're in no hurry, I'll fix up Mr. Wilkes."

A little burn of anger heated Reavis. He smothered it, said quietly enough, "I am sure this—gentleman—will wait his turn. I am in just as much of a hurry."

The room clerk, looking at the little shine in Reavis' dark eyes, fidgeted. The mustache went up and down again with a mumble of words.

Turning a belligerent face toward Reavis, Wilkes piped in a higher, overriding voice, "I am not accustomed to waiting, sir!" He turned away with a peremptory word to the harassed room clerk.

There was a tough edge now on the smile Reavis had for Wilkes as he said, "I am sure you will be glad to wait this once." His hands shot out in a quick movement, took Wilkes under the arm pits, lifted him from his feet. Quartering, Reavis set him down rocking on his heels. With the tough edge still on his lips he said to the man behind the desk, "The gentleman has decided to wait."

At that the man with hair like a buffalo hide chuckled. "That fellow's got brains as well as a hell of a lot of muscle."

The dark eyed man nodded. "What did that other say his name was? Wilkes? I heard that a government man was coming. Something about the railroad." The speaker moved across to where an irate Wilkes was sputtering threats to an impervious Reavis, and the latter heard him say, "I am Edward Creighton, Mr. Wilkes. There will be no more trouble about the room." He put a hand on Wilkes' arm and swayed him away. "Come and meet William Paxton."

IN THE plain hotel bedroom Reavis removed his coat, splashed tepid water from the big white pitcher into the bowl on the commode, scrubbed travel from his face and shaved. So the dark eyed man was Edward Creighton, the man who had made sixty thousand on one freight haul!

Reavis dried his face and sat down on the edge of the bed. Plain as the room was, it would prove too expensive for a prolonged stay. He must find a way to earn a living. His thoughts strayed again to Edward Creighton.

Seldom given to impulse, Reavis obeyed one now. He put on his coat and went down at once to the hotel lobby. He saw Creighton on the point of leaving. He crossed swiftly to him.

"Mr. Creighton? Your pardon, sir. My name is Lee Reavis."

There was recognition in Creighton's clever dark eyes as they met Reavis'. He appraised not unfavorably the lean, brown, clean-shaven face, the tall figure with its wide shoulders. "Yes?"

Looking at the other Reavis decided instantly that frankness was his best weapon. "I am new here." A smile looped over his lips. "I guess I don't know how to go about things."

"Easterner?" The word was as much a statement as a question.

"Ohio, sir, but—" Reavis' smile was wry this time "—I am neither a promoter nor a capitalist."

"It is a country in which to become either."

"It takes money to make money. I must earn my way."

Creighton took a deeper look at the eyes meeting his. He said now. "Opportunity is here for the man who is willing to take a risk—and keep his head."

"You have such a man in me," Reavis stated forthrightly. "I have had some experience with men in army service."

Creighton said, "I will speak plainly. You are more the man of action than the merchant type. In the end you would not be happy selling sugar or molasses or dry goods, or keeping books in a bank."

"When I can I will buy land and raise cattle. Land is cheap and there will be many to feed."

The other nodded. "Until the Indian question is settled you cannot raise cattle without too much loss. Or much grain. It is shipped in. The army posts and the pilgrims are the chief markets. You can wait for land."

"And in the meantime?"

Creighton held his answer before he said, "The railroad will not drive a spike for two or three years yet. There will be money in hauling freight by wagon train. It is dangerous. Others beside Indians raid wagon trains."

"I am used to danger. You would not be telling me these things without a reason."

"No," Creighton returned with a smile at the other's shrewdness. "The forts and some of the settlements are markets for corn. I have a supply. I am in need of a man to act as my agent. He will start by traveling with a wagon train. You may be that man. But army ways are different. The army has certain rules. There are no rules here not easily broken."

"When does the work begin?"

"There are some arrangements to make. Perhaps two days, perhaps longer. The pay is a hundred and fifty a month. If you are successful—"

"I will be successful," Reavis told him with some grimness. "And thank you."

"I think you will. In the meantime, the hotel is expensive. You would do better to go to the boarding house of Katie McCann. Tell her I sent you."

II

THE BOARDING HOUSE, REAVIS noted the following morning when he angled over the cow path that led to it, was a two-story frame building grayed by sun and weather. A shallow porch stretched across its front. A middle-aged, melon-breasted woman, sitting in a rocking chair,

raised shrewd shoe-button eyes to Reavis when he stood before her.

He lifted his black slouch hat. "Mrs. McCann?"

"The same. An' what can I do for ye?"

"I am wanting board and room."

"Pilgrim?"

Reavis, to whom the expression was strange, looked perplexed. "I have heard the term, but—"

"I mean are ye here today and gone the next? Travelin' west?"

"Then I guess I'm a sort of pilgrim, Mrs. McCann. Edward Creighton sent me here. I am to work for him."

"So Eddie Creighton sint ye? Leave it to the Irish to stick together. How long will ye stay?"

"Two days, a week maybe."

"Thin ye're no more'n a pilgrim," stated Katie. "Even if Eddie Creighton sint ye, I don't like short stayers."

A pleasant smell of baking bread sifted out to the porch. Reavis wrinkled his nose. "That bread smells better than a bouquet of flowers."

"Ye have a tongue in your mouth." Katie rocked back and forth for a little. "It will be three dollars a day," she brought out suddenly.

A smile touched the corners of Reavis' lips. "I thank you, ma'am." He took a thin leather wallet from a pocket and extracted a piece of gold. "I will bring my luggage before noon. And, if the meals are as good as the bread smells—"

"Don't try the blarney on me, young man. I'm too old for that."

"No woman is too old to dislike hearing pleasant things, ma'am."

Katie McCann looked after the tall figure as it receded down the path. She sighed gently. "Niver too old." She sighed again. "I mind whin..." She shook her head and called out, "Linnea! Linnea!"

LEE REAVIS returned to the boarding house a few minutes before the noon meal. At his knock Katie McCann's bulk swayed forward from the dim interior of the front-to-back hall. "Come in. Come in! The room's ready. First on the right at the top of the stairs."

A door at the end of the hall opened and a composed voice said, "The dinner is all ready, Katie." The words had a faint foreign inflection.

"Yes. Well. We've got a new boarder."

A girl came through the doorway. Reavis took a look at her and felt a little shock of surprise.

"Ye didn't tell me the name," Katie reminded, catching the look in his eyes.

"It is Reavis. Lee Reavis, Mrs. McCann."

"Niver mind the handle. Me name is Katie to me lodgers." Her glance shuttled from the girl to Reavis. "Ye look like ye'd seen Linnea Holm before."

"On the river steamer as a passenger," explained Reavis. "I am a stranger to Miss Holm."

"Thin ye're strangers no longer. Shake hands with Linnea Holm. She's stayin' with me a few days before she goes out to help her uncle at Ben Holladay's stage station at Fort Kearny. I'm learnin' her a few ropes before she goes."

"Then you're a stranger to the west, too." Oddly, Reavis felt pleased.

"Yes. My folks were old country, but I've lived in America since I was little."

"An' now she's come west—to get experience," Katie put in. "An' this sure is the place to get it."

"It's a good thing to have," Reavis said gravely, dry humor on his mouth. He picked up his luggage. "There is no need to go up. I can find the room. First one on the right."

"Perlite, ain't he?" Katie chuckled. "Ye can eat as soon as ye come down. An' if ye know boardin' houses—first at table gets to eat all he's able."

Reavis said, "I'll remember," took up his luggage and, restraining another look at the girl, went up the stairway.

That night after supper a queer restlessness drove him from the house. After he took a look at the town he entered the Herndon House bar, put a piece of silver before the barkeep and said, "Whiskey." Holding the glass he stared down into the amber liquid thinking not of his new job, but of the girl, Linnea Holm.

With all of her quietness and native dignity, she was not merely one of a crowd. She had worn a cotton dress at supper, something in a blue-and-white checked stuff with a collar but little whiter than her throat. The thought of her in this way

disturbed Reavis and he felt at odds with himself. He was vexed because he wanted to talk to her, wanted to see the blue of her eyes, the honey colored highlights in her hair.

Reavis tilted his head to let the whiskey slide down his throat. After a little he had his fill of the place and wheeled out into the deepening dusk. Coming up to the boarding house over the dusty path he caught a blur of figures on the porch, recognized Zuder's throaty laugh and Linnea Holm's voice. A hot anger against the girl burned him. If that was the kind of trick she was...Then Zuder was saying, "Don't be so stand-offish. I've seen a lot of women. They're all alike. If it's money you want I've got it, and I'm willing to spend it on a girl I like."

"Let me pass!" Reavis caught the anger riding Linnea's voice and saw the motion of her body as she attempted to push by the other.

He came up to the porch as the trader closed a hand on the girl's arm and pulled her toward him with, "Oh, no you don't! Not 'till I'm ready!"

Reavis put a boot on the porch step. "You're ready now, Zuder."

The trader whirled, loosing the girl's arm. "So it's you, Captain, wanting to try your luck. I said you'd always be stepping in where you had no call. Well, it ain't the army now!"

Reavis stepped full upon the porch. "Step away from the door!" he said in a flatly controlled voice.

"Sure, Captain, I'll step away." Zuder moved from the door, but he moved toward Reavis and he moved quickly.

Reavis sensed the blow coming at him barely in time to roll away. The trader was strong and he had put his weight behind the swing of his fist. Although Reavis was going away the impact of the blow sent him back against a porch pillar. In that he was lucky because it kept him on his feet and on the porch.

Zuder was quick to follow up his advantage, but this time Reavis side-stepped and, when the other's fist grazed his ear, sent his own blow into Zuder's belly. Breath jolted from the trader in a whistling grunt. Before he could suck wind back into his throat Reavis caught him on the side of the jaw. The trader was big and heavy. He did not go down but, off balance, stumbled down the porch steps, missed one and sprawled in the dust.

The man was up almost at once and Reavis knew the hot anger that scorched him at being handled roughly in front of the girl. "You've had luck tonight, Captain." Zuder's voice was thick. "My time will come. From now on it's the whole road!" He waited for a moment as if he would say more, then in a strangled voice, "The whole road, Captain!"

Reavis watched the man's solid shape blur into the hot dark. One thing had been demonstrated. Zuder would fight, but he would fight at his own time and his own choosing.

"You have made him your enemy," Linnea said. "I am sorry.' '

"He was my enemy before," Reavis told her. "Where is Mrs. McCann? You should not be here alone."

"She went out for the evening. It was hot and I came out to sit on the porch. Then that man came, and you came. I thank you. Twice now I owe you thanks. The third time..." She moved to the door screened with mosquito netting. Reavis opened it to let her pass through. He listened to her footfalls receding down the hall.

III

THE WAGON TRAIN MOVED with a slow indifference through the rolling country that billowed out from the Missouri bottoms to break like spent combers on the flat run of the Nebraska prairies. Two days later it emerged upon the level straightaway paralleling the shallow Platte.

Reavis, riding with Dave Meyers, the wagon boss, in the partial shelter of the lead wagon's canvas, stirred impatiently now and then at the crawling pace of the mules, feeling Dave's sly grin as he endured the cannonade of the western sun.

Meyers was a solid chunk of a man with a stubble of blond beard roughing his sunburned face. He shifted the chew of tobacco in his mouth and spat with the wind. "Hell of a country," he grumbled. "Wind blows all the time. Fries you in summer, freezes you in winter." He spat again and said, choosing his words care-

fully, knowing that questions were not relished in this frontier country, "First time I know of that Creighton ever had an agent go 'long with a wagon train."

"I'm a green hand," Reavis said. "Maybe he thought I needed breaking in. How long yet to Fort Kearny?"

"These here mules do twenty mile—maybe twenty-five—a day. It's a hunderd and forty mile to Kearny from Omaha."

The answer was roundabout and Reavis made a swift calculation. "About four days, then."

"You're good at figgerin'. Yep, if the Indians don't bother and the skinners don't get whiskey somewhere, another four days should see us at Kearny." Meyers spat again and settled into silence while the afternoon put its scorch on them.

When the sun dipped on the prairie rim in a crash of colors, the wagon boss signalled for the night camp and sent the lead wagon across the Trail to the grass near the river. After hot coffee and sowbelly, night dropped down on the prairie, which ran blackly away into miles of other prairie. Out in the dark a coyote raised a pointed nose to send its wail skyward.

Flat on his back, feeling the cool of the night coming down upon him, Reavis reflected over old memories and new happenings. He felt the challenge of this raw country and something primeval in him rose to meet it. He felt too, a queer impatience to see Linnea Holm again. She must be at the stage station now, he conjectured. He had never met a woman who held the interest for him that Linnea held. Thinking of her, sleep took him quickly.

FORT KEARNY, established in 1848, was the main supply depot and headquarters for the other forts stringing out to Fort Bridger. Looking at it when the wagon train drew abreast, Reavis experienced a military man's disappointment at its lack of smartness. It had no stockade and was as open to attack as any small village. The buildings were constructed of 'dobe brick and lumber hauled in from Omaha, and were huddled about the small parade. Two sentries lounged at the entrance.

"Where'll you park for the night?" Reavis asked Meyers.

Meyers jerked his head. "Just north of the fort. Some grass left there."

"Then I'll see about the corn now. Be at camp later."

"If you're smart, you'll eat supper at the stage station," Meyers advised. "Ben Holladay sets a good table."

Lee wondered whether Linnea had yet arrived here to help her uncle. He said, "All right." Without waiting for the slowly moving wagon to stop Reavis put a boot toe on the hub of a front wheel and dropped into the dust. He crossed to the listless sentries and said, "Quartermaster?"

One of the men jerked his head indifferently toward a weathered building. "That's the store house, but you'll probably find the lieutenant over there." His head gave another jerk toward a two-story building fronting the south side of the parade. "Go up them stairs on the outside. Ask for Lieutenant Armsby."

Reavis said, "Obliged," moved past the sentry, skirted the conoidal top of the magazine, passed the stables and so came onto the parade. A trader's light wagon with two black horses at the feed box was parked along side. A flag lifted wearily now and then from the pole in the parade's center as a little wind took it in passing. At the southwest perimeter of the fort was a small earthwork with the black snout of a field gun poking toward the distant sand hills.

Crossing to the building indicated by the sentry, Reavis mounted the stairway and stepped into a big barn of a room in which were scattered a few chairs and tables. At the far end of the room was the black maw of a fireplace near which four men were playing at cards.

Advancing into the room, Reavis took the look of three officers and then encountered the stare of the fourth player, a civilian. His eyes narrowed as he recognized Zuder. He put his own stare on the man until the pale blue eyes dropped away. He said then, "I was told I would find Lieutenant Armsby here."

"I'm Armsby." A stocky, red faced officer put his cards face down upon the table.

"My name is Reavis. I represent Edward Creighton. When you are at liberty I would like a word with you about selling some corn to the fort."

"Reavis? How'do. Meet Captain Doane and Lieutenant Talbot of the First Nebraska."

Reavis raised stiff fingers to the brim of his hat. "Gentlemen!"

"Take a chair," Armsby went on. "The lucky man who's been taking our money is Herman Zuder."

Reavis looked at the trader without interest before he said, "I have—encountered him before."

There was something in the speaker's voice and phrasing that caught Talbot's attention. He looked up sharply as Zuder came back with, "Reavis knows now that all trails cross the Oregon."

The poker hand was played out and Armsby lost to Talbot's two pairs. "Good thing you came in, Reavis, or they'd have my horse. So Creighton has corn for sale."

"Yes."

Captain Doane remarked, the wet ball of a handkerchief busy at the sweat channeling his burnsides, "You have a smart salute. Seen service?"

"Few haven't, sir. I—"

"The captain was with Grant in Virginia," put in Zuder, a malicious look crowding his eyes. "We've met before right enough. He—"

Lieutenant Talbot got a look at the bright shine in Reavis' eyes and broke in with, "You served under a good man." He raised his long frame from the chair. "How many wagons in your train, Reavis?"

"Five. Corn all shelled and sacked."

Armsby pushed his lips in and out. "We're pretty well stocked at Kearny now." He considered for a little. "O'Brien at Fort McPherson might need some. If you'd freight it out, it would save us the haul. How much a bushel delivered?"

"Two dollars, seven and a half cents."

"Creighton wants a good price. McPherson's only a hundred miles."

"That's five days, Lieutenant."

"I'll telegraph O'Brien and let you know after retreat," Armsby decided.

"I'll be here." Reavis raised his fingers again to the brim of his hat and, ignoring Zuder, said, "Gentlemen!" and so passed from the room. Crossing the parade he passed the trader's light wagon once more. A wide-shouldered power house of a man with a beard-stubbled face, leaning against the wagon, gave him a long look from a pair of small, coffee-colored eyes set too close together. Reavis felt them burning his shoulders until he reached the fort's entrance. When he reached the wagon train he found the skinners pushing the chores for the night.

"In a hurry to get to Dobeytown," Meyers explained gloomily. "Lucky if they get back tonight. It's the toughest spot this side a hell."

"They'll have to get back," Reavis stated. "We'll probably be on our way to McPherson at daybreak. See that some stay to guard the train."

He walked to the river, splashed water over hands and face, came back and told Meyers, "I have to see the quartermaster after retreat. Then I'll eat at the stage station."

Just as he reached the post entrance the bugle blew the call, the round notes rolling over the black shadows of the ragged cottonwood trees to the brown prairies beyond. He watched the troopers stand to horse. The field gun sent its bellow in a crash of sound and the flag slid down the pole into the arms of the color sergeant. There was a shout of command and the troops passed in review with a toss of glinting sabers.

Reavis waited until the men were dismissed and then had his interview with Armsby. "O'Brien will take the corn," the quartermaster told him. "He will give you a voucher for it to be honored at headquarters in Omaha. Keep a lookout for Indians. The Brulé Sioux are rampaging a little."

Reavis nodded. "I'll watch out."

WITH some of the crashing colors of the sunset still in his eyes, the interior of the stage station seemed dim to Reavis when he first stepped into the comparative coolness of its cypress log walls. The dining place held no eaters save for one man eating noisily at the far end of the long table. Reavis took a second look at the fellow's square shape and recognized the man he had seen leaning against Zuder's wagon parked near the parade.

A middle-aged man with a gray, half-moon mustache came through a doorway, looked at Reavis and asked, "Supper?"

"Yes."

"Sit down anywhere at the table. I'll send somebody."

The speaker left the room. Reavis took a place at the table that put its length between him and the other. That somebody must be Linnea. He felt the pulse in his neck beat quick and hard at the thought of seeing her again. When she came into the room and saw him she stopped for a moment. He stood up. "Linnea! I hoped I would see you here."

He caught a look in her eyes he could not fathom as she said, "Where else? But you want supper. There is ham or buffalo steak and—"

"Ham! Anything! It is good to see..." Reavis' voice trailed away as he felt the narrow attention of the big man at the end of the table.

"It will take a little time," the girl told him and passed from the room.

When the meal was placed before him he said directly, "I'm on my way to McPherson with a wagon train of corn for Edward Creighton. I am to have my chance."

The stubble-faced man shoved back his chair, placed some silver on the table, and gave the two a ribald grin before edging his big shape through the doorway.

"Who is that?" Reavis asked, feeling his temper stir at the fellow's look.

"He comes sometimes to eat. I heard him called Gorman."

"Does he bother you?"

"He only—looks." Linnea lit one of the overhanging oil lamps.

"This is no place for you," Reavis stated abruptly.

"I have my work and my uncle is kind. And sometimes I—dream."

"Dream of me, Linnea?"

In the yellow light he caught once more the look in her eyes he could not fathom. She held her answer before she said, "I have known you but a few days. And—I am not the kind of woman you have been used to. I am Norwegian. I worked as a hired girl before I came out here. I wanted a chance too—like you."

"I worked on a farm, Linnea. It was my father's, but some day I will have land here. I will need a woman like you."

"There is one thing a woman must have," she went on as if he had not spoken.

"Yes? What is it, Linnea? I'll—"

Boots made a patter of sound outside. A figure blurred the doorway and the wagon boss's voice came into the room. "Thought you'd be here. We've got to get to Dobeytown! Every man jack in camp has lit out for the place!"

The corn was Reavis' first thought. "Who's guarding the wagons?"

"I went to the fort. The quartermaster sent a couple of men."

"I'll be right along." Meyers' shape melted from the doorway. Reavis faced the girl, feeling her nearness like the warmth of a flame. Pushing away desire to hold that flame against him he said, "Goodby, Linnea." He put his hands on her shoulders, hesitated, and then wheeled to the door. "I'll see you when I get back from McPherson."

THE smell of dust lay hot and acrid when Reavis and Meyers came along the narrow, packed dirt that was Dobeytown's thoroughfare. Against the light yellowing from the saloons, gambling places and bawdy houses, the shapes of riders and men on foot showed briefly.

"The trails cross here," Meyers explained. "It's as tough as they make 'em!"

From the half shadows where they stood Reavis appraised what he could see of the town. Yes, a tough place, he decided. The kind of a place where drifters, killers, gamblers and others of their ilk would find friends. Light struck out from a saloon across from where the two men stood.

"That's the Pilgrim's Pride," Meyers said. "Biggest saloon between Omaha and Denver."

Reavis nodded. Watching two shapes across the street, he heard a voice say impatiently, "I say it'll work slick as grease. I know them kind. Take a woman they know and—" the swing doors of the saloon cut off the words.

After a moment Reavis said, "Let's go." Crossing the packed dirt the two pushed into the Pilgrim's Pride. The place was filled with smoke and liquor smell and the bass run of men's voices through which ran a fugue of women's shrill tones. Men lined the bar or sat at the gaming tables running the length of the room.

Reavis, Meyers at his elbow, shouldered in at the bar and held up two fingers to the barkeep. "Whiskey." The barkeep gave him the look he had for strangers, placed

a full bottle of whiskey and two glasses before him and waited.

Putting silver on the bar, Reavis poured his drink and passed the bottle to Meyers as he took a look at the room. Half way down the place his glance fell upon Zuder and the power house shape of the man who had been at the stage station. They were drinking with a girl not old, but with the bloom of youth rubbed away. Zuder's lips moved. Presently the girl stirred and her bold eyes met Reavis'. She smiled, but he looked away without interest to the tables beyond. Turning to Meyers he said, "The skinners are back there at a table." He let the whiskey slide down his throat. "Get hold of them and let's get out of here."

A throaty voice said at his elbow, "Buy me a drink, mister."

Reavis turned to see the girl who had been sitting at Zuder's table. His look went past her to the trader and the big man sitting with him. Something in their stare made him think of the words he had heard a voice in the dark saying—"slick as grease. I know them kind."

He knew then that the pattern of the scene had been arranged, and it was without surprise that he saw the chunk of a man heave his bulk from the chair, sway toward them. *I must keep out of this,* was Reavis' thought as he gave denial to the girl. "Aw, c'mon, mister, buy me a drink," she repeated. "I think I could like you."

Before Reavis could refuse again the big man's hand on his shoulder whirled him about. The fellow said in an ugly rush of words, "No damn Buckeye can buy my girl a drink!"

Reavis was sure of the pattern now. No one save Zuder would have told Gorman that he was from Ohio. A sudden quiet came upon those nearby, and the feel of trouble sent its tension into the room.

"What's a little drink, Gorman?" the girl said petulantly. "I can drink with anybody I want to." Then to Reavis, "Going to let him scare you out?"

Men moved away from the bar then, their eyes beginning to shine with the lust of a fight. Meyers touched Reavis' arm. "Pay him no mind," he urged. "Let's go."

Reavis gave the wagon boss a bleak look. Whatever he did or said, it was plain that he would in some way be forced into an encounter with Gorman. Sizing up the fellow's width of shoulders and massive arms, he came quickly to the conclusion that attack was his best defense. He said now with a bitter edge on his smile, "Give the lady a drink," and moved his shoulders a little out from the bar.

Gorman, experienced in barroom brawls, grinned as he said again, "No damn Buckeye can buy my girl a drink. You can play around at the station with that little bi—"

REAVIS made his play, the planes of his face showing sharp and clear, a cold fury burning behind his eyes. The balled fist that crashed on Gorman's mouth was a blur to those watching. The impact snapped the big man's head back. His right fist seemed to come up from the floor in the same instant to bludgeon against Gorman's jaw. Big as he was, the weight behind the blow sent the big man down.

Reavis let his breath out, watching the fellow shaking the daze from his eyes. "Get up!" The words cracked in the room's stillness like pistol shots.

It took Gorman, used to rough and tumble fighting with nothing barred, a full half minute to understand why Reavis did not kick him in the ribs or bash in his head with a thudding boot. When realization did come, his own boot shot out in a sudden arc, caught Reavis just outside the groin. Although he was instinctively moving away, the shock and pain of the blow sent him back against the bar. Then Gorman was up and at him, and Reavis was grimly hanging on, fighting the sickness that crowded him.

He saw that stubbled face as through a red mist, heard as from a long distance the yells of those watching. Gorman's eyes were burning with triumph as he mouthed again, "You an' that little slut!"

Reavis' cold anger took on white heat then. Gorman's blows were feather-light. With the bar behind him as a lever, he threw his weight against the big fellow, putting a foot of space between them for an instant. That instant was enough. Reavis' hand closed on the neck of the whiskey bottle at his elbow and he brought it down upon Gorman's head like a butcher's cleaver upon a block. The big fellow's eyes glazed and rolled back. His knees began to fold.

Reavis caught him by the collar then, slewed him around against the bar, and held him there. Quite deliberately, he began to smash at Gorman's mouth. The blows sounded dull and muted, but they crushed the man's lips into a bloody pulp, splitting them against his teeth until it seemed there was but a black hole where a mouth had been.

The girl's voice sounded then in a high, thin scream, and she began to beat at Reavis' head and shoulders in impotent fury. The thin sound of her screaming penetrated his concentration. He let the senseless shape slide to the floor and sent the hot, bright challenge of his look at Zuder.

The trader's bugged eyes shifted away. Reavis waited for a little, pumping air into his lungs. "Get the skinners!" he told Meyers. He let his look go over the men staring back at him. Two of them started to rise and, certain of their leaving the place, Reavis wheeled from the room, the quick lift and fall of men's voices following him.

IV

ON THE RETURN TRIP FROM Fort McPherson, and but one day's travel from Fort Kearny, the wagon train parked under a big cottonwood on a little rise overlooking the Platte valley. After beans, bacon and coffee Reavis went out into the dusk to be alone with his thoughts.

"Don't get too far," Meyers cautioned. "Indians ain't none too friendly."

Reavis nodded absently and went on toward the river, looking at what he could see of the valley. It was, he thought, a location made to order for a ranch. Rich black loam needing no clearing spread up and down along the river. From a house on the knoll the glint of the river could be seen when he and Linnea sat on the porch on a drowsy Sunday afternoon. Captain O'Brien's voucher for the corn lay tucked in the thin wallet in his pocket. Edward Creighton would find that he was a man to depend upon.

It was dark when Reavis turned back, realizing that he had come farther than was prudent. He hurried his steps and was relieved when he made out the blur of the cottonwood against the night sky. Pausing for a last look at the river, a dim, misty streak, a little sound caused him to wheel quickly. He sensed movement in the shadows, called guardedly, "Meyers?" Something crashed against his head. Black night rolled down, blotting out an agonizing pain.

The stars had wheeled in the sky when Reavis struggled through the fog of torment and darkness that engulfed him. Waves of pain surged through his head when he tried to rise. He groaned, set his teeth and got to an elbow, where he waited for the hammer blows in his head to lessen. Through the crazy whirl of thoughts he remembered the voucher for the corn. Oblivious of pain for the moment he got a hand in his pocket. The wallet was gone! Realization of the loss brought those heavy hammers battering at his head again. He pushed them aside and swayed to his feet. Staggering and weaving like a drunken man, he reached the wagon train after an eon of effort. He heard the confused run of men's voices. Then the ground came up to meet him.

Sunshine was in his eyes when Reavis groaned to consciousness again. Meyers and the skinners were grouped around him. He felt the burn of whiskey in his throat and the grateful coolness of a dripping cloth on his aching head.

The wagon boss let his breath out with relief. "We combed the country for you. Thought the Indians had got you sure. What happened?"

"Something — somebody — hit me," croaked Reavis.

"It sure did," Meyers agreed. "A little more'n it would a been happy huntin' grounds for you. See 'em?"

"No. Too dark."

"Wa'nt no Indians," a leathery-faced whacker put in, "or you'd be wearin' a new kind of haircut."

Reavis' eyes grew bleak. After a little he raised himself to an elbow, hearing Zuder's voice saying, *The whole road, Captain.* He tried to rise. "Give me a hand, Meyers. Let's get moving. I've got a job to finish."

HIS head, cared for by the post doctor, was still sore as a boil under its bandage when, three nights later, he and Meyers again pushed through the swing

doors of the Pilgrim's Pride. The barkeep put whiskey and glasses before them, his dead pan eyes brushing that bandage.

Turning, Reavis let his look shuttle the room. His eyes stilled when his glance rested upon the back of a man sitting at a gaming table midway down the place. He saw only the back, but Reavis felt that he would know Zuder in the pit of hell. The fellow was sitting with two others. From the way the cards fell they were playing draw poker. From the winnings stacked in front of the trader luck was favoring the man. Luck or...

Watching, Reavis remembered what an old time gambler had once told him—a crooked dealer's eyes will always follow the cards to rest. The germ of a plan formed in Reavis' mind and crystallized. He let a hand slide surreptitiously to the Navy Colt on his thigh. It was loose—and ready. He said now to Meyers, "We're going to sit in a poker game—unasked. Whatever happens do just as I say. Come on."

The two made a casual way forward to stop just behind Zuder. When the hand was finished Reavis moved around the table and said, "I'd like to sit in."

The trader's eyes bugged as they did the night he saw Gorman downed, then a mask of stillness came over his face, while wariness crept into his eyes.

"You can have my place," one of the players said. "I'm about cleaned."

"All right with you, Zuder?"

"Sure! Everything's all right with me." Something like a grin touched Zuder's mouth as he asked, "Indians been tryin' to lift your hair?"

Reavis' eyes flickered at the other. "What do you think?" He scooped up the cards, shuffled, won the cut for the deal, saw the raise that followed and dropped out. On the second hand Reavis won the pot. When the deal came to Zuder he watched the man's eyes. He felt a little prickle as he saw them intently following each card to rest.

At that, Reavis felt the tension ooze out of him. Zuder, riding his triumph, would press his luck to the limit. He was not surprised when he picked up his cards to find two queens, nor, when he discarded, to find a third queen in the draw. The player on his left threw in his hand. Zuder, playing his cards close, discarded three, dealt three to fill.

Before he could pick up the cards Reavis leaned over, clamped a palm down upon them. "You always play with marked cards don't you, Zuder?" The words were meant to carry.

Silence fell about them. To this there was but one answer. Zuder's mask slipped from his face. His hand darted under the table. The snout of Reavis' gun leaped and lined at the other. "Hold it, Zuder!"

"You damned Buckeye!" Zuder grated. "You'll pay for this a million times over. You and—"

"Put your hands on the table!"

The trader was exploding in a violent refusal when he had a look at Reavis' eyes. His hands went down on the table. Reavis took his hand from the cards. "Turn them up, Meyers."

Deliberately the wagon boss turned the cards face up one by one. Three kings! In the hush men let their breaths out in a long sigh. Chance alone, once in a million times might cause the cards to fall like that, but no man looking, conceded that it was chance now. His face contorted, the trader made a motion.

"Sit very still, Zuder," Reavis told him in a voice like a monotone. "There's one thing more." He moved around the table until he was directly behind the other. The gun in his hand jammed against the trader's back. Reavis' free hand slid under the man's coat. When it came out it held a thick leather wallet. This he tossed upon the table.

"Go through it, Meyers. He stole a voucher for corn from me. You'll find it in there." Reavis knew that he was taking a chance in the bold statement, but he had resolved to play his hunch.

UNDER the silence of those watching, Meyers thumbed through the wallet's contents methodically. When he had finished, he muttered, "Don't see it." He looked at Reavis, a question in his eyes. "Maybe—"

"You don't see it because I don't know nothing about a corn voucher," sneered Zuder, triumph riding his voice. "An' you, Captain, will eat your words—now!"

A dryness came into Reavis' throat, but he held his face expressionless as he took

another chance. "You missed one pocket, Meyers. Look again."

The wagon boss shook his head. "I don't think so, but..." He opened the wallet again and sent exploring fingers through it. He was about to put it down with another shake of the head when a fingernail caught in a thread. A narrow slit in the leather gaped and the white of paper showed. Meyers spread a slip of paper open upon the table.

Reavis' breath came out. He picked up the voucher, slanting his look down at the trader. "That does it, Zuder. You're through here! Get moving!"

Zuder lurched to his feet, his face livid. "I told you once this country wasn't big enough for both of us," he got out in a strangled voice. "One of us goes! It won't be me!"

"You have your chance now."

"I'll be in front of this place at noon tomorrow," promised Zuder, still in that strangled voice.

"I'll be waiting."

The trader grabbed up the contents from his wallet and stuffed them in a pocket, sweeping the circle of faces about him with a long look. "And what Reavis gets tomorrow, any man who stands in my way will get!" He turned and lurched from the place.

DURING their two-mile plod back to the wagon train, Meyers cautioned with, "That trader's a wild man now. If I was in your shoes I'd take a peek around a corner afore I turned it."

"Yes," Reavis agreed absently. He was feeling the let down now from the tension of the scene at the Pilgrim's Pride. They came abreast of the stage station. "I'll be stopping for a while," he said.

The wagon boss nodded. "Keep your eyes peeled. Zuder's the kind that would meet you tomorrow with a Navy Colt in one hand and a derringer hid up his sleeve."

"I'll watch him," Reavis promised brusquely. He was impatient to see Linnea. He needed her poise and serenity now, as he was to need them many times in years to come.

She stood by the long table in the room. In the light spreading from the hanging lamp her face had the withdrawn look of a woman who has dulled herself to the strain of waiting.

"You are back," she said in a low voice.

"Of course I'm back." Reavis crossed to her. "Did you expect anything else, Linnea?" A smile softened his mouth. "And I got the voucher for the corn from Zuder. I told you I would."

Her look did not change as she said, "But he is still in the country."

Reavis looked at her squarely. "Yes. As he says, there is no room in this country for both of us. He wants the whole road."

Her eyes held his with a look he could not read, but he felt something expectant in it. He spoke bluntly. "I am to meet Zuder tomorrow noon in Dobeytown."

Light ran out of her eyes and she waited a little before saying, "It will always be like this. You will—"

"I'll come back, Linnea, just as I have always come back. I love you, Linnea. When I am away from you I know no rest. If anything happened to you..."

Strangely enough, light came back into her eyes. Reavis read her look then. "You little fool! Was that what you were waiting for? You knew I loved you!"

"But I had to hear you say it. A woman's life is made up of little things. Pretty curtains at a window...flowers in a pot. Words like you just spoke. A—" He saw her eyes widen. She kept her voice down but he caught the urgency in it. "The door! The door!"

Reavis wheeled, reaching for the Navy Colt. He was too late. Zuder was in the doorway, his gun lined on Reavis' middle. Behind, a little to one side, his face bearing the scars made by Reavis' fists, Gorman's shape bulked.

"You will not need to go to Dobeytown tomorrow, Captain," the trader said.

His eyes on the man, Reavis said, "Get out of here, Linnea."

"No," Zuder stated. "She stays. I want her to see how pretty you look with a belly full of lead."

Through Gorman's cracked lips came, "I've got a score to settle, Zuder."

"I'll settle the score for both of us. Keep out of this!"

Reavis' eyes swept the two men. The trader's gun was lined so a slug would take him in the belt line. Gorman's gun was on his middle too. Swiftly Reavis went

over his chances. There seemed none. It brought him a great regret. His life with Linnea was done before it had begun. One resolve he made. No matter how many slugs tore into him, his own bullet would get Zuder before death took him. The trader would never live to harm Linnea.

"Zuder," complained Gorman. "I told you—"

"Shut up! You think I'd let any one but me kill him, Gorman? For the last time I'm telling you to keep out!" Zuder's voice held a snarl.

Gorman's face took on an ugly look. "I told you I'd mix in this only if I got the chance to beat his face to jelly. Then you can shoot all you want!"

It was then that Reavis felt that Chance perhaps might take a hand. If he could keep on talking, pit one man against the other until one made a slip..."Gorman," he put in then, "if you so much as lay a finger on me I'll kill you with my bare hands."

The big man hunched his heavy shoulders forward. "I'll lay more'n a finger," he growled.

"You'll keep out of this, Gorman," Zuder said angrily. "This is my—"

"Lead don't satisfy like fists. He belongs to me first!" Gorman's gun swung from Reavis to Zuder. "I mean to have it my way."

There was finality in the words. For a moment the tableau held before Zuder gave a short laugh, reading his own danger in the hot eyes of the other. "Your way then. I'll keep him covered until you close."

Gorman slid his gun into leather. Keeping out of Zuder's line of fire he came forward slowly, but with a terrible certainty in his deliberate advance.

Linnea crowded back against the table, her hands behind her gripping its edge. Gorman took another slow step, another. Her hands loosed the table edge, one wrist brushed against something cool.

Reavis, waiting, balanced on the balls of his feet, his knees flexed. He was certain that Zuder would not wait, would shoot before Gorman closed, would shoot Gorman as well to achieve his end. Gorman stepped close and his big fist looped back.

Linnea's fingers closed upon that coolness that had touched her wrist. It was but a coffee cup, a heavy china cup, but she threw it with all her strength at Gorman. It struck the big man on the shoulder and bounced off to crash on the floor. For a second, perhaps two seconds, the big fist held. In that second or two Reavis came against Gorman with a catlike swiftness, jamming his own body against that big shape in a twisting turning movement that put it between him and Zuder.

It happened as he thought it would. Even as Gorman's shape was turning Reavis heard the bellow of Zuder's shot and felt the big man's body slump against his. Holding Gorman against him for the moment, Reavis' Navy Colt echoed Zuder's shot. The trader's gun crashed again. Reavis let go another shot and heard the smack of the bullet as it tore into Zuder. Gorman's big shape was too heavy for one hand and he let it slump to the floor. Zuder was coming forward now, walking slowly as a man picks his way along a strange path at night, but with a singleness of purpose that held but one end.

Reavis felt the wind of Zuder's bullet brush his cheek, then he fired twice. Dust popped from the man's coat. He stumbled, looking at Reavis, his lips drawn back from his teeth. He brought both hands to bear on lifting his gun. All of a sudden life seemed to drain from him like water poured from a pitcher. Blood gushed in a red, frothy stream from his mouth. Swaying then like a tree falling under the woodsman's axe, the trader crashed to the floor.

Feeling his own knees slope, Reavis stared at the two still shapes on the floor. Two dead men. One killed by his own hand, the other through his agency. He put his gun on the table and turned toward Linnea.

SHE came into his arms blindly, her face against his shoulder. After a little she lifted it and he caught again the look that had been in her eyes when he told her that he loved her.

He felt a curious humbleness before he stooped for the first kiss to pass between them.

Wherein FRONTIER STORIES presents another rip-snorting episode of the Old West—as in those great days when grizzled mossyhorns strode in from wild and lonely trails to hold all listeners spellbound. Their smoking yarns often seemed a mite too tall to be swallowed—and yet turned out to be true as truth itself!

So ease your shoulders against the rough log walls and let a good trail-pardner hark you back to the days when the West was young!

The Cripple Creek Trail

By RUTH ELLEN SMITH

THIS IS THE STORY OF LIFE in the early days of the gold strike at Cripple Creek, Teller County, Colorado, by an old timer who was there! This mining district has yielded more than three hundred million dollars worth of gold and is still producing! And for the first six and one-half years of the town's exisence, I was one of the several thousand inhabitants!

I was sixteen when the family moved from Missouri to Colorado Springs, Colorado, in the winter of 1889. My father was a prospector, earning little and moving often. He had moved us—my mother, sister and brother, and myself—into town and he was still roaming the mountains and valleys to the south, in search of the ever elusive "strike."

My brother and sister were in school, but, in the spring, when I was seventeen, I found myself a job as cashier in a downtown restaurant. It was a wonderful new life for me, and it was there I met Will, the man I married and spent the rest of my life with.

Will was from Illinois, and had been educated for the ministry. He had been first attracted to the west by the lure of opportunity and was merely looking around for a chance to make some money. Will was twenty-seven then, and had brought a few hundred dollars along from Illinois. His opportunity turned out to be a half-interest in a butcher shop. His partner, Fred Holmes, was a young man of about the same background, and still single.

So, it came about, that with less than two months courtship, Will and I were married, with every intention of making Colorado Springs our permanent home. Little did we know what the future held for us!

The butcher buiness was flourishing and everything was going smooth for a few months. Then, the next thing we knew, gold was discovered at Cripple Creek!

Cripple Creek was about thirty miles south of Colorado Springs, and in a wild and almost inaccessible region. "Gold at the grass roots!" the newspapers shouted, and it was very nearly true! The gold strike was on every body's tongue. As far east as the Atlantic states, north and south, the news spread! Every sort of conveyance was put into use to carry the gold-mad men into the territory. From all directions they came, and their destination was invariably the same—Cripple Creek!

A railroad, the Denver and Rio Grande, promptly started to lay the roadbed for a railroad into the region and, not to be outdone, the Southern Missouri started to lay rails through the mountains from the western side! It was a race to the finish!

MY husband and his partner promptly sold their meat-market and, after making arrangements with Fehr Schutzie, Denver's largest wholesale liquor dispenser, to get the liquor to the workers swarming in, we three followed the crowds. The Denver & Rio Grande had literally hundreds of men at work on the construction of the roadbed and it was our intention to follow the progress of the railroad, from one settlement to another with the saloon of "Will and Fred."

But there were mountains, streams and gorges to cross or flank, and the building was necessarily very slow at best. So it was that we spent the first year at Gilmore, the next two at Midland, and the next three at Gillette, as the work progressed.

IN THE winter of '92-'93, the railroad was finished as far as Midland, Colorado, and from there on into Cripple Creek, the gold seekers must take freight wagons, stages, or any kind of vehicle that could be found. There was only one road, a toll road, operated by a private company, which had erected a bridge across a roaring mountain stream through a narrow gulch. There was simply no possibility of getting to Cripple Creek without crossing that toll bridge. Several of the old Concord stage coaches made the trip from the railroad terminal to the scene of the strike every day, often with as many as twenty passengers to the coach, and each one must pay the toll. The toll receipts were terrific!

These stage coaches were pulled by six or more horses, strung out, and were driven by expert drivers, who could handle six lines with one hand, and crack a fourteen foot whip with the other. They usually came into Midland with a grand flourish and made the turn up the station platform with their horses in a gallop. Among the expert drivers was one known as Long Line Bill and another called "Keno."

The road from Midland to Cripple Creek was through a wild, rough country, with many twists and curves, switch-backs and hairpin turns. All kinds of people came—gamblers, miners, prospectors, promoters, and grafters. Many were tenderfeet, this being their first taste of the west. And many were genuinely frightened by the reckless driving through this perilous trail, and greatly relieved to set their feet at last on the solid ground of Cripple Creek!

Among the card sharks, confidence men and crooks who followed the camps was one known as Soapy Smith. Smith was a small quiet man, with a large mustache. He kept pretty much to himself until he went into his sidewalk show, when he really became an actor. He dealt in sleight of hand, card tricks and gambling, and operated with two or more accomplices. It was next to impossible ever to win a cent from him or prove any unfair play. He was finally barred from operating in Cripple Creek, and thereafter went from small town to small town, but always near the crowds.

In '93, just a short time before we moved from Midland to Gillette, there were many land patents taken out and stock companies organized for the sole purpose of selling stock to "back easterners." Lots of worthless stock was sold as the companies would buy any available land within a radius of several miles.

My husband acquired some of these claims for small debts and was able to sell

sixteen claims in a lump to the Cripple Creek stock exchange for one hundred dollars each! This stock exchange sold memberships for fifty dollars each, and each member was entitled to buy or sell whatever stock they wished.

One of the hangers-on at the saloon was a fellow known as Pick Handle Jack, who had once been a foreman on one of the construction gangs, and had acquired his name because he was said to have become angered and clubbed some of the men with a pick handle. Later one or two of the men died and Jack had lost his job. He spent his time "mooching" around the saloon from his former crew. As they were all afraid of his anger, they did not dare refuse.

Will and Fred felt that Pick Handle Jack was fast becoming a nuisance around their place, and planned a trick to be rid of him. Along the right of way roamed dozens of hogs, loose and unguarded, eating the garbage from the camps. They slept at night among the piles of railroad ties along the tracks.

One day Will said to Pick Handle, "Let's you and I slip down to this first big pile of ties tonight and butcher a fat hog. We can sell it to the butcher shop, and nobody will be the wiser." Jack fell in with the scheme, and came back to the saloon with a borrowed ax and two sharp hunting knives.

Arriving at the pile of ties, Will left Jack at one end while he went around to the rear to poke out a hog. Suddenly shots rang out and Will fell to the ground, yelling, "I'm shot, Pick Handle, I'm shot! Come back!"

But Jack was gone, running as fast as his legs would carry him. From the top of a box car came two fellows who had been in on the scheme, laughing fit to kill! The plan was working fine.

Jack ran the full quarter-mile back to town, and rushed into the saloon. "Fred," he cried, "Will has been shot! He's out along the right of way!"

"Then you must have done it!" shouted Fred.

"No, honest, Fred, we went out to get a hog, and somebody shot him!"

"Somebody get the sheriff," shouted Fred. "You're not going to get away with this!"

But Pick Handle Jack rushed wildly from the saloon, and never came back! He was seen later at work in Colorado Springs.

THE country was honeycombed with big mines and gold was being produced in large quantities. Then the Union came in. Union men began to control the work and rapidly signed up most of the workers. In the spring of 1894 the Union called all the miners out on strike.

The center of the district was Bull Hill and the miners had all congregated there, to await the results of their strike and to prevent, if possible, anyone else from working.

The mine owners called upon the sheriff for aid in getting the mines again operating. Several small squads of deputies, sent in to arrest the strikers were promptly beat up and sent back. So the sheriff called for recruits and enlisted the aid of several hundred men, including all kinds of gunmen, bad men and roughs, to assist in the arrests. Any man who would go was armed with a six-gun, a rifle and put on board the Colorado Midland—for the battle of Bull Hill!

The town of Gillette, where we then lived, was the end of the railroad, and the stopping off place of these deputies, on their way in to Cripple Creek. They hung around the saloons, and spent the night in the Gillette hotels. As soon as a good-sized body of men had arrived they marched in a body up the road toward Bull Hill. There was an estimated ten or twelve hundred of these deputies. The sheriff had placed Bob Mildrum in charge of these men—Bob Mildrum, the notorious gunman from Wyoming!

The miners, of course, heard that they were coming, and threw up breastworks on the side of the hill. They planted dynamite under the road over which the deputies must march.

The deputies, upon hearing of these preparations for their reception, became wary and stopped at Grassy, a few miles from Bull Hill. There they dug entrenchments and built breastworks of their own. By that time the Governor had decided to act and had sent out the state militia on the heels of the deputies. (He was known as "Blood-To-The-Bridle-Bits" Wait be-

cause of some remarks he had once made.

The soldiers were less than half a day behind the deputies. They overtook them at Grassy and started them back across the rough trail they had come. The deputies had amused themselves on the way in by shooting at anyone or anything they saw moving on the hillsides. Now they were all under arrest themselves.

The next winter, during another strike, another army of strikebreakers were sent in. These men dynamited a depot and killed several of the striking miners.

THE next summer, Gillette decided to hold, of all things, a bull-fight. It was the only bull fight ever held in the United States. But hold it they did. We were there!

The population of Gillette had dwindled to about 700 people, but the town of Cripple Creek by this time held nearly 12,000. Great plans were under way for a celebration, and what started out to be a rip roaring, wild west show added to itself this bull fight. Someone suggested the enterprise and the idea took hold like wildfire. The fight was promoted by Joe Wolf, a colorful figure of those days.

The show was greatly advertised and came to the ears of the Humane Society in Denver. They decided that it must be stopped. Half a dozen men in Gillette were deputized to keep order, and to keep their eyes open for anyone trying to stop the show but none made themselves known, if any were there.

Thousands attended the two days of bull-fighting, and it was a real Mexican affair with all the trimmings. The toreadors and the matadors were brought from Mexico and were dressed in real Spanish costumes. The toreadors were on horseback, their horses gay with ribbons and colored streamers, and carrying decorated barbs. The matadors and banderillos were also gaudily attired, and quite expert in their parts, whose final touch was to give the be-ribboned bulls the *coup-de-grâce*!

Along with the bull fight was the real wild west show, with colorful, expert performers from Arizona and the southwest. Among these was one known as Arizony Charlie Meadows, who was an expert rifle shot, and exhibition rider. With him were his brother, Kid Meadows and the Kid's wife, all wonderfully skilled.

And Governor Wait's veto to the bull-fight arrived after the second performance, thus ending the only one ever held, not only in Colorado, but in any of the forty-eight states.

The very next spring, while Cripple Creek was at the height of its fame and the peak of its population, disaster struck. The town was almost wiped from the face of the earth in a few short hours!

Winter had not yet lifted, when one night during a heavy wind and snowstorm, the demon fire broke loose in the closely built business district of Cripple Creek and, fanned by an incessant breeze, spread and spread!

Every able-bodied man and woman was frantically fighting the spreading flames. Their efforts availed but little. Men and fire fighting equipment were rushed in from Gillette, Midland and all the surrounding towns. But the fire burned for more than three days. By that time the town was almost totally destroyed.

Everywhere was confusion and near-panic. Great black clouds of smoke rolled over the city, on the never-ending wind. Then every few minutes loud *booms* sounded as explosions went off and buildings collapsed.

Furniture was moved out of houses. Often it would burn in the street, as there were never enough wagons or carts to aid all. Stores loaded up merchandise in wagons and in anything available, only to have it driven away and often never heard of again.

Some of the bums and riff-raff raided the saloons, and rolled barrels of whiskey out of town and into a convenient gulch. There they were discovered, drinking and eating, while the rest were fighting fire. Angry men loaded them aboard box cars and sent them out of the country.

Cripple Creek has never again reached its former glory. Much of its glamour is gone along with its population. But it is still a romantic and interesting little town. Amid beautiful surroundings, it sits at an elevation of nine thousand eight hundred feet, among still loftier mountains. It seems to be dozing, like an old man with his memories.

ACE IN THE HOLE

By HAROLD R. STOAKES

"Have a drink, stranger," the frosty-eyed miner said.

The Spread Eagle Saloon rocked and roared. The men bellied against its bar toasted the new gold strike. Dave Ross listened bitterly, knowing the gold-gleam was only hell-fire!

THREE YEARS COULD BE A long time in a man's life. To Dave Ross, sitting in the back office of the Spread Eagle Saloon, it seemed longer than that since the first Conestogas had creaked over the hills and the mining camp town of Canyon City had flared up like a match in the Bad Lands gulches.

It seemed almost a lifetime ago since he and Aaron Lassiter had built the Spread Eagle Saloon—an eternity since he and Aaron had been partners.

Dave thoughtfully studied the bushed sideburns on Aaron's tilted head, and the checkered fanciness of Aaron's plaid vest. Aaron always had been a dude dresser. Even now his black string tie was neatly bowed, but the velvet-fringed collar of his frock coat was bunched around his bull-strong neck.

From outside the office door Dave could hear the boisterous songs of buckskin-fringed miners as they crowded the saloon's bar.

"I can see there was one advantage in being a partner of yours," Dave said softly. "You never had to have one of your gunslicks plant a rod in my back to bring me in for conversation."

Aaron's bullet head turned slowly so that sputtering reflections from the kerosene lamp creased the round thickness of his neck.

"Mike varies his methods, depending on who he's sent out to handle," Aaron said blandly.

Dave glanced at Mike Priller. Mike's guns were holstered now, but the shadows of them made round knobs against the side of the roll top desk—a reminder that he was still there, looking after Aaron. The jangled notes of a tinny piano floated through the door.

Business must be good if Aaron could afford to have a piano bull-freighted all the way across the Dakota plains, while the Teton Sioux were playing rifle tunes on the spokes of pioneer wagons.

"Still lots of suckers out front?" Dave half-questioned.

Aaron rubbed his blunt fingers against the horsehair covering on the arms of his chair. "We like to think of them as customers," Aaron said smoothly. "A man gets an even break at the Spread Eagle now."

"An *even* break?" Dave laughed thinly. "I can remember a time when you didn't believe in giving a sucker any kind of a break at all. I can remember a time when the suckers walked away from the monte table and went outside to blow out their brains," Dave said softly. "I can remember—"

Aaron thumped his fingers angrily. "And I can remember a time when you said a little hell's fire in a man was what kept him going," Aaron snarled. "I can remember a time when you said that if a man could do arithmetic, he could figure the odds against him."

"That was before you packed the place with your picked gunhands and rigged the tables so a man didn't even have the small chance that the odds of the game gave him," Dave said dryly.

Sudden anger reddened Aaron's face. "I didn't have you brought in to hash over the past. I want to talk about the Wolf Mountain gold strike."

DAVE shifted in his chair. "I always was slow on catching up with your games, Aaron, and I don't know what you're up to now. But there's been no strike in the Wolf Mountains. I just came from there."

It was that simple statement of truth down at the livery stable that had brought Mike Priller's gun prodding into Dave's back and had resulted in a forced call at Aaron's Lassiter's office.

"Maybe you know more about the Wolf Mountains than we do," Aaron said thickly. "All I know is we got word of a strike. There ain't nothing wrong with the fact that we got a livery stable full of pack animals ready to sell to prospectors at a reasonable profit."

"Nothing except the fact that you must have started buying up those animals a long time before word of a gold strike came along," Dave growled significantly.

A crooked smile rolled back the corners of Aaron's lips. "Some folks get wise quicker than others," he said.

Dave sat forward stiffly in his chair. Aaron Lassiter had spread word of a gold strike in the uncharted Wolf Mountains, and miners who had grubbed in the inhospitable gulches of the Dakota Bad Lands welcomed a new chance at riches.

Suckers, Aaron Lassiter had once called such men. And he probably called them suckers now. Dave nodded toward the door. "Suppose I go out there and tell them there's no gold in the Wolf Mountains?" he questioned.

Mike Priller stood aside as Aaron lumbered across the room. "Suppose you try doing that," he said throatily.

Dave looked through the doorway into the milling confusion along the smoothly-polished bar. There was everything there that a new frontier had to offer—daring, courage, bravado and heartbreak.

Feverishly, buckskin-clad miners crowded under the swaying lanterns above the monte table for a last dance with Lady Luck. Men who had scraped along on Canyon City's petered-out gold mining returns had a new fever in their blood. There

was gold in the Wolf Mountains, they said, for the first man who staked a claim.

Suckers! Dave formed the word noiselessly against his lips. That's all any man was to Aaron Lassiter. Then Dave heard Aaron's rumbling voice behind him.

"Get out!" Aaron blared. "If you ever bring another thievin' proposition in here, I'll have you thrown in the street."

Before Dave could turn, Aaron slammed the door and Dave looked into the cold-eyed hostility of a hundred suddenly upturned faces.

He walked stiff-legged toward the door of the Spread Eagle Saloon. When he was halfway there a frosty-eyed miner stepped away from the bar.

"Have a drink, stranger," the frosty-eyed miner said, holding a half-filled whisky glass in front of him. "I hear you just came from the Wolf Mountains. Maybe you can tell us the shortest route to the riches."

Dave halted. So Aaron had already spread word of his coming, forestalling anything that he might say. There was a contemptuous undertone to the frosty-eyed miner's voice.

"The shortest way to riches is a hard day's work," Dave snapped.

The whisky seemed to spurt from the glass, stinging Dave's eyes. Anger roared within him as he clawed forward. But a half-dozen arms pinioned him. The frosty-eyed miner leaned safely against the bar.

"I like polite answers from tin horns," the miner said.

Dave felt himself jostled forward.

"Throw him out, like Aaron said," a voice rumbled behind him, and Dave felt pawing hands upon his shoulders and he was twisted and shoved toward the doorway.

When he finally stumbled out onto the board walk, Dave heard the screeching laughter that filled the Spread Eagle.

Tense with anger, Dave wiped the whisky from his face. *Tin horn,* the miner had said, and the word rasped deep within him. Yet, Dave had to admit, the miner couldn't be blamed.

When he and Aaron had run the Spread Eagle it had been a gambling den, and the suckers who bucked the boards couldn't be blamed for not knowing that he had nothing to do with it. Yet it seemed odd that none of their hatred was directed toward Aaron.

Dave felt suddenly tired as he crossed the snow-filled street. Bob Karrington could tell him what was going on in Canyon City. Aaron Lassiter had started a gold strike rumor that was without a shred of truth to it. There had to be a reason behind Aaron's actions.

Dave hesitated. Calling on Bob Karrington meant that Bob's sister, Joanna, might be home, but that was a chance he'd have to take.

WHEN Dave faced Joanna across the small library table in the Karrington living room, he became conscious of the aching tension that stiffened his muscles and thickened his tongue.

Reflected light from the lamp enmeshed itself in Joanna's amber hair, and when Dave looked into her eyes, her lids dropped suddenly, as though running away.

Dave winced. For months he had pictured Joanna's face in the jagged flames of mountain campfires. It cut like a knife wound now to see her eyes hiding away.

"Is Bob home?" Dave asked thickly.

Joanna shook her head. "He went out a month ago with a group of Aaron's prospectors."

Dave stared incredulously at Joanna's face. "Things seem to have changed while I've been away," he said softly. "I can remember a time when Bob wouldn't have been caught dead working for a crook like Aaron."

"Sit down, Dave," Joanna said quietly.

Dave sensed the tension in her body as she stood rigidly by the table. Joanna's blue eyes were clouded and troubled.

"Before you left you said that Aaron brought in the gun-hands and rigged the gaming table at the Spread Eagle," Joanna said, low and direct.

Dave nodded.

"Aaron says that it was you. He says that he had to get rid of you as a partner before he could clean up the place."

Dave rose half out of the chair. Joanna waved down the protest.

"The proof is on Aaron's side," she said quietly. "Since you left the games at the Spread Eagle are straight. Aaron has run off the gunhands, too."

"All of them except Mike Priller, maybe," Dave said tautly.

Joanna's fingers were curved white around the edge of the table. "You told me other things before you left," she went on dully. "Things that I wanted to believe. You told me how the fires of sin burned high in a man, until he saw men blanch white and destroy themselves because of those sins. You said that you wanted to go away for a little while until you were sure that the fire was burned away."

Joanna's voice had risen, becoming a scourge across Dave's thoughts. Only a man who had lived with the lashings of his own conscience could know how true that was. But how was a man to know when the evil had run out of him? How could he be sure that the devil's flaming tongue wouldn't leap up within him again?"

"What do you expect me to believe now," Joanna asked hoarsely, "when you sit quietly, without a word to say in defense? When your first efforts to ease your conscience were at another man's expense?"

Dave sat while anger crackled in his brain. There was nothing he could say now that he hadn't said before. Aaron had always said that some day he aimed to go respectable. Aaron played his cards well.

After their partnership had been dissolved, Aaron had seen his chance. Aaron had turned to straight games and fired the gunhands and pretended that they had been there against his will. Aaron had passed all of the fires of his sins onto David and was ready to claw his way to respectability on Dave's back. Even now, Dave reflected bitterly, Aaron had become respectable enough to hire Bob Karrington to work for him.

AS DAVE walked back along the slippery board walk, the wind whipped frigidly around his mackinaw collar. In the Spread Eagle Saloon the noisy celebration of gold hungry miners had increased.

Dave felt his boot heels ring solidly against the frozen snow underfoot. It was difficult to figure just what Aaron was aiming at. The rumor of a gold strike in the Wolf Mountains was untrue, and yet Aaron was fostering that rumor and stood ready to sell enough animals to the miners to start all of them on their way.

It didn't make sense that Aaron would want to get rid of all the miners around Canyon City. The miners were Aaron's customers, and their departure would ruin Aaron's business.

It made sense in only one way. Dave stopped stock still, the winter cold and frosty around his chin. Right now, Aaron had sent Bob Karrington and a group of prospectors into the hills. Bob was one of the best judges of gold in the Bad Lands. Aaron must have made a strike somewhere up and down the gulches near Canyon City. Undoubtedly, he wanted the miners out of the way so he could post all the best claims before they returned from a wild goose chase into the Wolf Mountains.

Dave walked on. The door of the Spread Eagle was thrown open so that the roar of the miners filled the street.

Suckers! The word was there, but it turned inward. When a man like Aaron was planning to take advantage of his fellow men, someone should stand against him, and try to help them.

Dave remembered the cold eyes of hatred and the clawing, pushing hands that had twisted him through the doorway of the saloon. Not that they'd appreciate help particularly, but being human beings, they probably deserved it.

At the livery stables, Dave glanced briefly at Mike Priller. "You can saddle my horse, I'll be riding on," he said tonelessly.

Mike Priller's squinty eyes glinted in the gloom of the stable. "You finding Canyon City an uncomfortable place to be?" he questioned.

Dave didn't answer. When the horse was saddled, Dave gripped the reins and twisted the animal sideways, so that when he swung into the saddle, he had the protection of the wall to his back.

Dave levelled a .45 at Mike Priller's heart. "You can let your gun belt fall to the ground," he snapped.

Dave watched Mike languidly comply with his request. The man was unhurried, an old hand at gun play. When the gunbelt lay on the dirt of the stable floor, Dave motioned toward the crowded stalls.

"Now untie every animal you got and herd them to the door."

When the nervous animals were congre-

gated in front of the stable door, Dave crowded his horse in at their flank, still keeping a watchful eye on Mike.

Then, firing his revolver over their heads, he started the horses into the street. For a moment the closely-herded animals balked, and then panic spread through them. Bellowing and pawing, they lunged into the street and stampeded toward the hills.

Held back by the momentary slowness of the herd, Dave crouched low in the saddle as he heard the roar of a gun behind him. Then the doors of the Spread Eagle burst open as the charging animals ground the snow of the street to powder.

Dave heard the shouts behind him, and then a fusillade ripped the air around his head. A slug tore along the sleeve of his mackinaw. The outraged bellowings of the miners floated after him as the herd stampeded out of town.

For a couple of miles Dave kept them closely bunched and then, the panic drained from them, he let them break away in small groups, seeking protection of the gulches and canyons.

In the darkness, Dave reined grimly to a halt. Whether they knew it or not, he'd done the suckers in Canyon City a favor. Until they could round up the pack animals, they wouldn't be able to leave for the Wolf Mountains. In the meantime, he might be able to find out something that all of them should know.

Through the night, while cold pinched at his fingers and hoarfrost formed flaky and numbing on his mackinaw collar, Dave combed the gulches and canyons for signs of Bob Karrington's prospecting party.

When dawn finally pinkened the canyon walls, Dave tightened his belt against the pinching hunger within him. Overly long, the belt slid through the buckle and halfway around him again. When he had bought it, it was all that the Canyon City general store had to offer. Somehow he had never gotten around to cutting it shorter.

Dave sat the saddle tiredly, conscious of the stiffness that made his legs brittle against the horse's sides. The night's search had been fruitless.

Overhead, the wind moaned across the canyon slit as Dave reined his mount along the twisting canyon floor. Too late, Dave heard the scraping on the canyon ledge behind him. He turned just as the flying blockiness of Mike Priller struck him from the saddle.

On the ground, Dave tried to roll viciously from Mike's clawing hold, but the numbness of his arms and legs refused to obey commands.

He felt the rocks of the canyon floor jabbing against him as they rolled over, and then Priller was on top of him. Dave clutched out at Priller's upraised arm, but his wind-whipped fingers slithered off Priller's sleeve.

Dave saw the arc of the pistol, and then a roaring blackness filled him as the gun-butt crashed into his head.

WHEN Dave's senses returned, thumping pain racked through his head. In the darkness, Dave tried to stretch his legs and found that they were bound tightly at the ankles.

His arms had been cramped behind him and his wrists tied so that he could move his fingers, but that was all. Underneath him the ground was cold but dry. He groaned as he struggled to a sitting position.

"You all right?"

Dave heard the question and sought around in the gloom for the direction of the sound. Bob Karrington's voice was too much like Joanna's to be mistaken.

"Are you guarding me?" Dave asked.

Dave heard the rueful laughter, low and tense. "I'm tied up as tight as you, and I've been here twice as long."

As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, Dave could make out the shadow of Bob Karrington a few yards from him. "What do they figure on doing with us?" He asked.

Bob Karrington laughed mirthlessly. "Right now they're waiting for Aaron to come out and decide. Mike Priller wants to shoot us and scalp us so they can blame it on the Sioux. I think probably Aaron will like the idea."

"Where have they got us?"

"We're in the tunnel entrance to the mine on the old No. 17 Claim. In back of us it's caved in. Right here the roof is held up by half-dozen shaky logs." Karrington wriggled closer. "Careful you

don't bump into one of them and bury us alive, unless you want to cheat Aaron out of a chance to play Indian."

Dave felt the pain again from the nob on his head squeezing down through his eyes. "Why are *you* tied up?" he asked.

"Aaron's found gold, and the strike is rich. For months Aaron's been playing the good samaritan, staking the miners to grubstakes to go elsewhere in return for a hold on their supposedly worthless claims around Canyon City."

Bob Karrington paused. "I started back for Canyon City to tell the miners the truth, but Mike Priller caught up with me and brought me back."

Dave twisted around so that his back was toward Bob. "See if you can work your fingers enough to untie my hands," he whispered.

Dave felt Bob's fingers fumble against the ropes that bound him. Finally Bob tiredly stopped the effort.

"They're wrapped too tight," Bob said. "It would take a knife, even if a man had both hands free to work with."

Dave became conscious of the gnawing tightness of his belt against his stomach. Forcing his hands up under his mackinaw, he tugged at the belt with his fingers until he had slipped the buckle around to the back and eased it open.

The extra length of the belt slipped from the belt loops and slid through Dave's fingers, trailing against his thoughts. It was odd the things a man put off during a lifetime . . . the cutting down of a belt that was too long . . . the cutting away of his sins before it was too late.

What was it that Joanna had said? A man's sins aren't washed away until the fires of hell go out of him . . .

In the gloom Dave eyed one of the logs that supported the roof and wondered if he dared risk leaning against it. He wriggled over to it, trying to test its solidity with his cramped fingers, while the tag end of his belt rubbed across his hands.

Tensely, Dave leaned against the support and felt the roof groan, while an idea flickered through his thoughts. The belt buckle in the middle of his back dug against his spine.

Dave eased forward. Unbuckling the belt, he tried to snake the curved end of it around the log.

The belt flopped back, eluding the lunge of his bound-together hands. Dave pulled it back, rolling the belt into a small ball so that when it sprung open again it retained a circular shape.

Dave's fingers ached as he tried again to push the belt around the log and bring it back to the buckle. This time the bent shape of the belt didn't snake away from him. With shaking hands Dave tightened the buckle so that the belt bound him firmly to the shaky log.

Grimly Dave waited. When Aaron arrived there might be a surprise in store.

DARKNESS thickened inside the mine tunnel so that Dave knew the day was ending before footsteps were heard and the rusty-hinged door to the mine shaft swung open. In the half-darkness that ringed the entrance, Dave could see Aaron Lassiter's tilted head. In his outthrust hand Aaron carried a knife.

Dave looked at Aaron's twin revolvers that hung from his belt and grimaced. With the fires of hell still burning inside of him, Aaron needed at least two guns to protect himself from the vengeance that all of his sins might bring.

"I'll cut the ropes on their legs and bring 'em out." Aaron bawled over his shoulder.

Stealthily, Dave brought his knees up so that he was hunched against the log and began slowly worming his way to his feet. The belt slid upwards as he moved. Overhead the roof groaned.

Aaron turned. "Keep away from that support," he growled.

Dave watched as Aaron cut the ropes around Bob Karrington's legs. Finally Dave was standing, with his back against the log, conscious of the tightness of the belt that bound him to it.

Aaron cut the ropes from Dave's feet and stepped back. Dave felt the stinging pain of cramped flesh where the ropes had been. Tensely, he braced his legs, and then tugged forward.

Overhead the roof rumbled as the log wrenched free. Aaron Lassiter leaped back, the knife sliding from his fingers. "You fool!" he screamed.

The log support came away, falling heavily on Dave's back. A clatter of shale struck Dave's head as he bent under the

weight of the big log, but the roof held.

In the shale dust ahead, Dave saw Aaron leap for the door. Dave lunged forward, with the log a battering ram that extended in front of him. The log struck Aaron on the side of the head, pitching him forward.

"Grab the knife," Dave yelled.

Dave backed momentarily and then maneuvered the ram end of the log around so that it caught the edge of the mine door and slammed it shut.

Backing up to Dave, Bob Karrington cut the belt so that the log rolled off Dave's back. The knife felt cold against Dave's wrists as Bob sliced the knotted ropes apart.

When he was free Dave grabbed the log and braced it against the door just as Mike Priller and Aaron's gunhands stormed the door.

After he had taken the knife and cut Bob Karrington free, Dave struck a match and looked down at Aaron Lassiter's inert bulk. Aaron breathed heavily, while blood oozed down the side of his face.

Overhead the weakened roof of the mine rumbled again. Dave shoved one of Aaron's guns toward Bob.

"We'll have to shoot our way out," Dave said tonelessly. "That roof won't hold much longer."

Slowly Dave eased back the heavy door. A roar of slugs splintered the door as he flattened himself against the side of the mine shaft wall.

Momentarily, Dave saw Mike Priller outlined in the gloom and fanned the hammer of his gun quickly. Mike Priller seemed like a statue for a moment, stopped halfway from reaching the boulder toward which he had been creeping. Then he crumpled forward.

Another fusillade raked the mine entrance and Dave saw Bob Karrington slump down along the side of the wall.

A second shadow rose in the darkness and again Dave triggered and heard a high-pitched, gasping scream as the gunhand plunged to the ground.

A weak blast raked the mine entrance and then the guns became silent.

Dave crept closer to the door, listening tensely. Far below he could hear the scraping of horses' hoofs. Aaron's hired gun hands were running away.

Dave started to turn back, raising almost to his feet before he saw the tilted mask of Aaron's bloody face before him. So keenly had he concentrated on the gun battle that he hadn't heard Aaron move behind him.

Aaron had the log overhead and charged forward with it, the fires of hatred still in his eyes. At close range, Dave fired.

Dave saw Aaron's lips twist suddenly. His bullet head lopped still further to one side as the strength seemed to drain from his pawing legs and he buckled sideways.

Dimly Dave saw the log ram against one of the supporting timbers, smashing it aside. Then thunder filled the mine shaft.

Dave barely had time to reach Bob Karrington's hand and pull him to safety as the mine shaft reverberated with falling rocks, burying Aaron Lassiter under an avalanche of stone.

BOB KARRINGTON was still breathing when Dave examined him. A gun slug had torn a small wound along his forehead. At last Bob sat up and then walked feebly, clinging to Dave's arm.

Dave told Bob of the plan Aaron had formed for stampeding the miners to the Wolf Mountains.

"There should be enough gold for most everybody right here," Dave concluded.

He became conscious then of Bob's eyes upon him. "I can figure out most everything except why you bothered to drive off the pack animals," he said slowly. "After the way the miners bounced you out of the Spread Eagle Saloon I shouldn't think you would have cared what happened to them."

"I don't just know..." Dave began, and then a feeling of warmth rippled through him.

For the first time Dave felt that he could go to Joanna with a clear conscience and a clean heart. When a man started helping his fellow men because he worried about them, it must mean that hell's fire had burned out inside of him.

WAR-BONNET AMBUSH!

By DAN CUSHMAN

THE WAGON TRAIN CREAKED wearily through the sultry hours of that August afternoon. To the south and east were unending plains. In the northwest were mountains, purple from distance. And in the sky, rising and rising until it faded in a smudge of gray, was a war signal of the Sioux.

At sundown another signal smoke answered, then another, and another, each at greater distance.

The scouts rode far ahead, watching for Sioux, but none of those wild riders of the plains was visible. Only their "smokes that talked." Bullwhackers, usually voluble, became grim and silent, letting their long whips speak for them. Mothers watched with worried faces from the backs of pitching Conestoga wagons, and when evening came there was extra caution shown in making the circle.

Jack Sells, tall and rawboned, with eyes and temper as sharp as the teeth of a saw, inspected the circle with a swift

A fury of gunfire met them.

Let the Sioux smoke-signals rise! These back East farmers calmly sat their lurching Conestogas, rolling toward the ominous mountains. Hadn't Jack Sells promised they'd get through? As for that villainous-looking Comanche John and his warnings—why, he was a road agent, fit only to be hung!

glance, then he coiled his long bullwhip and mounted his chestnut horse.

"What's up?' asked a flat-faced half-breed called "Blackfoot."

"That damned Parson over there. He's making trouble again."

"I'd wring his rooster neck!" growled Alvis Tucker.

Blackfoot, Tucker, and a snaggle-toothed trapper named Lesh had come with Sells from Fort Landen.

"You stay back, and keep your hands away from your guns. We have to treat these Missouri farmers easy for a day or two. I'll manage the Parson."

Sells rode across to Cy Denton's wagon. Cy was a man of middle height and middle years. The Parson was a straggly whiskered old scarecrow.

It was the Parson who had organized this wagon train of farmers back on the Platte. He had intended to take them on the south route by way of Jim Bridger's fort, but Sells and his men had joined

up near Laramie and sold them on the advantages of the shorter route to Fort Landen. Sells owned Fort Landen and traded fresh mules for worn-out mules at the rate of one for three, and it was his practice to act as guide when a big outfit like this one came along.

Sells rode up to where the Parson was talking vehemently to Denton, and swung down, reaching for the ground with a powerful leg. He walked over, dragging the heels of his dusty horsehide boots, massive shoulders hanging loose, his rolled-up bull whip in his hand.

"What the hell, Parson?" he asked, trying to show that he was really a fine fellow in spite of his rough exterior. "You aren't gettin' scared of them squaw fires, are you?"

"Those aren't squaw fires!" the Parson cackled in his rooster voice. "I know war signals when I see 'em. I been in this country before, Sells. I been up the Oregon Trail, the way this wagon train should be goin'. The way it *would* be goin', if I'd had my way!"

Sells looked at him contemptuously, then he turned his back to talk to Denton. "You're not taking this Bible-shouter seriously, are you?"

Denton rubbed the gray stubble at his chin. "Damn it, Sells, those signal smokes . . . I don't know much about Indians, but I've always heard—"

"I'll get you through, just as I promised."

"There are women and children along, Sells. I don't—"

"I said I'd get you through!"

The Parson was bristling like a fighting cock, "Yes, you'd risk the necks of everybody here just so's we'd go to your fort instead of Bridger's. Just for the sake of trading a few mules!"

SELL'S hand closed, massive and brown, on the coiled whip. He could use that whip as other men could use a gun. In his hand it was fast, accurate, and deadly. There were plenty of stories along the trail about how he had snapped men's necks with that whip. Judging by the fury in Sell's eyes, he would have snapped the Parson's neck, had not Denton and the others been around to watch.

Sells spoke, his voice trembling a little from the anger he was trying to hold down. "I've let you get away with a lot of talk these last few days, Parson. On account of that gray hair. But don't shove me too far."

The Parson paid no attention. "They told us back in Fort Laramie that the Sioux were warpathin'. Let's call a confab tonight and talk it over. You go see Bender and some of—"

"I suppose you want to turn around and go back!" Sells sneered.

"No, but we can still turn south. Right yonder, alongside the mountains. We can make it over to Bridger's."

A red-whiskered, heavy-jawed man stalked up after unsnapping his string from his tandem wagons. "You causin' trouble again?" he grunted, scowling at the Parson.

"Listen here, Bender, I'm tryin' to save our hides. Yours and your women folks, and kids' as well as everybody else's. Sells, here, is takin' us through war country just for the sake of tradin' a few mules and gettin' what money we have for supplies."

Sells' fury finally got the better of him. He'd taken more from this ornery old sky pilot than he'd taken from any man in his life. Veins stood out on his forehead. The muscles of his arms tightened the sleeves of his blue linsey shirt. He strode forward, expecting the Parson to retreat, but the Parson was not the retreating kind. He grabbed the old fellow and spun him as though he were light as a straw-filled scarecrow.

"Are you tryin' to say I'm in with the Injuns?" he bellowed.

"No. But if I thought it I'd say it. You're for yourself, first, last and day after tomorrow. You'll take us through if it's handy, and ride for your life if it ain't. I never said it before, because it ain't my habit to go around ruining men's reputations behind their backs, but you ain't especially high-regarded along the trail. You've taken trains into the bad places before, and then got out with your own hide. Two, three year ago when I was ridin' up from Salt Lake—"

There was too much truth in this for Sells to take. He thrust the Parson back, and struck him with the heel of his right hand. The blow would have staggered a

mule, and the Parson struck the dirt shoulder first like so many loosely tied bones.

He lay still with Sells looming over him, trembling with the desire to plunge on and swing his heavy boots.

"Jack!" cautioned Alvis Tucker who had ridden up behind him.

Sells breathed out deeply and shook himself. He had to hold back. The Parson had friends among these hayshakers. They were new to the country—didn't understand the frontier, how men fought. Just a day or two more of going easy, then he didn't give a damn. They'd have to go on to Fort Landen, regardless.

The Parson lay stretched out quite still for eight or ten seconds while blood ran from the corner of his mouth. Bender and Denton stood silently staring at him.

THE CRY of a woman broke the trancelike quality of the scene. A girl of nineteen or twenty ran down the rear steps from Denton's wagon, holding her long calico dress up from her moccasined feet. She threw herself beside the Parson and took his gray head in her lap.

"Parson! Oh, Parson . . ."

He was alive. He commenced rolling his head around on the end of his scrawny neck. Her fear left her then, and anger showed in its place. She stood up, looking at Sells with contempt, then at Denton, and the red-whiskered Bender.

"You let him do this! You just stand there and—"

"Mary, my child!" Cy Denton walked towards his daughter. "You don't understand—"

"You mean you'd stand by and let him do this to the Parson? To this poor old man?" She turned on Sells. "Oh, I know how you've fooled Bender and most of the others—"

"Mary! Go back to the wagon!" her father commanded.

A dozen men had gathered by that time, and more were on their way. Her eyes picked one of them out. He was a tall, rather lanky lad with a good jaw and intelligent, blue eyes.

"Steve! See what they've let him do to the Parson . . ."

The Parson sat up, shaking his ancient head. He revolved his jaw slowly, muttering. Steve bent over him and shook his shoulder. "Parson, are you hurt?"

The Parson could only mutter. Mary pointed to Sells who stood looking at them with truculent eyes. Steve faced him, trembling a little from anger.

"Did you hit the Parson?" he asked.

Sells laughed. "Well, now, if it isn't little Stevie James, showin' off for the lady!" His assumed smile suddenly vanished, and he barked, "Yes, I hit him. I slapped him, anyhow, though I dare say he's putting on an act to get sympathy right now. There are some things a man can't take, not even from a graybeard."

Steve started forward, but Bender grabbed his arm. "Here! I'm head o' this train, and I say no fightin'. You may not agree with Sells, but we took him on as guide, and it's up to us to abide by what he says. Even if—"

Steve jerked away. Sells was still there, hands on hips, whip rolled, grinning through tobacco-browned teeth. His attitude was a challenge for the younger man to fight.

Steve swung a left and followed with a right. The force of those blows surprised Sells a little. He shook himself, roared, and sprang forward, his left arm swinging in a devastating arc.

The blow caught Steve high on the cheek and smashed him so that he sprawled far back on the ground. Sells started forward as though to give him the boots, but he stopped suddenly. He thought Steve was going for the navy revolver at his hip.

Actually, the gun had only been knocked loose from its holster by the fall. Sells carried a pistol at each hip, but he did not reach for them. He owned a faster weapon. He swung his long bullwhip quick as a striking snake. The lash wrapped around Steve's right wrist.

Sells reared back, snapping Steve to his feet. He relaxed the whip so it unwound. He swung it back over his shoulder. Mary screamed and started forward, but the whip cracked like a rifle in front of her, making her draw back.

Sells laughed and said, "Don't worry about your sweetheart, little gal. I ain't a-goin' to kill him. No, I just want to demonstrate some of my tricks—tricks I

save up for buckos who try to draw guns on me."

The next swing of the whip caught Steve on the right shoulder, tearing a fragment from his blue shirt, and starting blood to oozing. Steve was still groggy. He staggered and went to his knees, lips contorted from pain.

Sells said, "And now, Stevie my lad, just so's you won't hear too much and get yourself into so much trouble, I'm goin' to have one of your ears for a souvenir."

Mary screamed. Her father held her back, but took a step forward himself. "Sells!" he shouted.

Bender got his bull voice to going—"Let him go, Denton. It'll teach the young fool a lesson."

"Oh-ho!" chortled Alvis Tucker, slapping the pommel of his Mexican saddle in appreciation of Bender's judgment.

Steve didn't know quite what was going on. His hat was off, his blondish hair blew in the slight evening breeze so that his right ear was revealed. It would be the whip of the master that could snap that ear off.

Sells stood with shoulders high, legs planted. He recoiled the whip and hefted it a second. He threw back his arm, allowing the lash to roll out behind him. He bent forward, and the long lash followed.

But, instead of a pop of the lash, a gun roared out. The whip and part of the stock sailed through the air, slapping harmlessly against a high wheel of the Conestoga wagon near which Steve crouched.

Sells hung there a second, not realizing what had happened. He stared at the whip stock, severed just above his hand by a bullet. Then he spun around . . .

AN UNKEMPT, black-whiskered stranger sat in slouched indolence on a wiry, Nez Perce pony a dozen long strides away. In his hand was a navy pistol with a wisp of powder smoke stringing up from the muzzle. He wore a floppy black hat, a Cree jacket with most of its beadwork missing, homespun pants, and scuffed jackboots.

The man chawed for a while, watching with deceptive drowsiness from beneath drooping eyelids. Then he spat tobacco juice and said, "Now, what was you sayin' about an ear?"

"Where'd you come from?" barked Sells.

"Me? Why, I come from a whole heap of a distance off. But back to that ear. I ain't sayin' I'm exactly the man that can pluck one off with a long lash, though I have done a bit o' bullwhackin'. But with a navy pistol, now . . . you take that right ear of you'rn for example—"

"Comanche John!" It was the Parson. He had recovered and was now advancing on his rickety legs. "Why, I heered they'd hung you up in Virginny City!"

"Yipee!" John slid his navy back in its tied-down holster, and reached for earth with one jackboot. "Parson, how are the sinners? I heered you was guidin' a wagin train for I-dee-ho, but I never suspected you'd be so thin-brained as to pick this Fort Landen route. Why, I supposed you'd be headed for Bridger's place, two-three days to south."

Comanche John shook the Parson's hand so violently the bony old man was almost jerked from his feet. He seemed to have forgotten all about Sells and the others, though a careful observer might have noticed that the butt of his right-hand navy was always in the clear.

"You mean you came south just lookin' for me?" asked the Parson.

"Yep." John twisted his whiskers around and spat tobacco juice with disapproval. "Oh, them gold camps! They're wicked. Plumb wicked. To shame Sody and Gamorrah, as you say in your sermons. I don't want no more part of 'em, Parson. Why, you know what them ringtailed rangy-tangs up in Bannack tried to do to me? They tried to give me a pree-sentation. A cravat. Guaranteed to hold a man's weight and last him a lifetime. Even offered to tie a knot in it for me. But you know how I am, Parson. Never the one to accept gifts. I says, 'No, boys, you just keep your blamed cravat. I'm ridin' southwise.'"

The Parson pulled Comanche John away so he'd be sure no one could overhear. "John, you ain't done it again? You ain't gone back to coach robbin' after all the reformin' I done on you!"

John whacked dust from the leg of his homespun pants and guffawed. "Why

share and share alike is my motto, and I'd call that to be a Christian atty-tude."

"Should have known you'd never get to be an honest man," said the Parson sadly. "I always liked you, John, but heaven help me, if I was sittin' on your jury when you came up, I think I'd vote to condemn you. You'll never in all your life sway from the paths of skulduggery and wretchedness."

"Hell, Parson, don't take it so hard." He went on impressively. "Guess you don't know what a personage I'm gettin' to be. They even made up a song about me. Want to hear it?"

"I have heard it."

"Yes, but maybe not the newest verses. Why, every mule-skinner on the road from Salt Lake to Bannack has made up a verse. Listen to this one. It's about me robbin' that Yuba coach down in Californy—" And John commenced singing in a froglike voice,

Comanche John rode out with a lad
By the name of Cisco Bill,
They stopped that six-horse Yuba coach
At the top of Lone Pine hill—"

"You ain't makin' it any easier on me by lettin' 'em know you're a road agent!" snapped the Parson.

John chawed for a while, looking searchingly at the Parson, and then at all the suspicious faces. "Whats gone wrong in this pilgrim string, anyhow?"

"There's a-plenty that's wrong."

"How'd you come by that bruise alongside your head?"

"Never mind."

"How'd you git it?" John was not bantering now. His voice had a whipsaw note in it. His eyes were hard as twin pieces of quartz.

"I ain't startin' no more trouble than we got already," said the Parson. "How I got this bruise is my affair, and I'm willin' that bygones should be bygones. I reckon the Sioux will give us all the trouble we need without my help."

JOHN let his bridle reins drag while he slouched forward to face Sells. Sells had recovered his arrogance by now, and stood with his stud-horse legs spread far apart, his thumbs hanging in his crossed gun belts. At one side of him, mounted, sat the breed, Blackfoot, with a rifle across his pommel. On the other side was Alvis Tucker, hawk-faced and intent, and Lesh, a dirty, bleary whisky-soak and frontier renegade.

And around about were others—mule skinners, honest farmers, come west looking for a home, and now scared half out of their wits by Sioux war signals. There were women and kids with faces poked from the ends of canvas-topped wagons—John saw these, too.

Sells barked, "We know who you are, and we don't want any of your kind. You're a road agent. You're Comanche John. You weren't keeping it a secret by all your hush-down talk. You were run out of Californy, and out of Idaho, and probably out of Montana territory, if the truth was known."

John laughed, looking around at the tattered wagons and the played out stock. "I 'low this would be one devil of a spot for a stagecoach robber!"

"Move on!" shouted Sells. "Git on to the south while you're still healthy!" He was speaking with his old-time swagger now that his men were in position to back him.

John chawed slowly, rubbing his whiskers with a thoughtful hand.

"Mebby I will and then mebby I wont. It all depends on the Parson, yonder. He's my shepherd, sort of. But whether I do or I don't, I'm goin' to say what I rode in here to say. And here she is—there's Injuns warpathin' all the way north to Montana country. They've burned every trapper's cabin and immigrant wagon betwixt the Sulphur Water and Fort Landen. They're wild, them Injuns, wrought up because they see white men rollin' in by thousands, shootin' off the buffalo, and plowin' under the grass. So far it's been only the Sioux and the Crows. The Cheyennes are still peaceful as they usually are, which ain't sayin' a heap. If you get south to Cheyenne country you should be able to make it on to Fort Bridger. You can stop thar and wait 'till the government gets soldiers up from Salt Lake."

Sells tossed back his head and laughed derisively. "Go south to Fort Bridger—two hundred miles out of our way? And

with Fort Landen almost in sight across that little range of mountains?" He looked at Comanche John, twisting down the corners of his wide, thick-lipped mouth. "Just what sort of a game are you playing, anyhow?"

John didn't bother to answer. He chuckled as though he found something amusing about the whole thing, and slouched over toward the wagon where most of the bullwhackers had gathered.

"Who's the head of this outfit?" he asked.

Bender came forward, his red whiskers fairly bristling with importance. "I am!"

"What do you aim to do?"

"I aim to cross the mountains to Fort Landen, of course."

"Ain't the Parson your guide?"

"Not any more he ain't."

John turned abruptly. "Then, Parson, maybe we better hit for the south. I ain't hankerin' that *my* hair should decorate some Sioux lodgepole."

Denton started explaining, "You see, stranger, we all have faith in the Parson, but it's been six years since he was over the trail. Then Sells came along and offered to guide us to Fort Landen—"

"Which he owns!" yipped the Parson.

"Well, perhaps. Anyway, we voted, and now I don't think it would be a good idea to start south. But we still need the Parson. We need him mighty bad to guide us from Landen to Idaho."

"Well, Parson, what she be?" John asked.

"I'm goin' to stay, John. I ain't the quittin' kind. You ride on if you like—"

"And leave you here amongst these wolves? Reckon I can tolerate this sort of company if you can." He squinted over at Mary. "Reckon *some* of 'em ain't so bad!"

II

COMANCHE JOHN ASKED NO other permission to join the wagon train. He simply led his cayuse over to the Parsons wagon where he gave him a good feed of Indian meal. Afterward, he went inside, took off his hot jackboots and wiggled his toes in comfort while the Parson stewed buffalo jerky and dumplings for supper. "He ain't goin' to take this on his hunkers," the Parson said, pausing in his culinary efforts to poke fresh sagebrush inside the dinky "Dan'l Boone" stove. "He ain't goin' to let you stay with this train if he can help it."

"You mean Sells? Reckon I'll take care of my own hide, Parson. If need be, I'll amble over thar and put a navy slug right betwixt his eyes."

"That's just what I'm skeered of. They'll hang you if you do it, John."

"Lots of folks has got it in their heads to hang me," said John placidly.

He was at the table, forking dumplings and jerkey in his mouth when feet thumped the let-down steps of the wagon, and Steve James, came in.

He said, "I didn't get around to thanking you, but—"

"Forget it," grunted John. "I always was the one to unlimber my navy in the cause of decency and honor."

Steve paused in the door, his young brows drawn in a troubled line. He had changed his whip-torn shirt, and nothing except a bruise high on his cheek gave evidence of his recent engagement with Sells.

"They're havin' a pow-wow over at Bender's wagon," he said.

"Concernin' me?"

"Yes."

"What's the verdict?"

"I don't know yet—but I don't doubt it would be safest to light out."

"Me? Comanche John? Light out?" He snorted, and shoveled dumplings with the razor-sharp end of his bowie knife. "Ain't you heered the song they made up about me? Every mule skinner from Salt Lake to—"

The Parson cut in, "That song's goin' to be the ruin of you yet. You're like all bad men—you get yourself a fancy reputation and then try to live up to it. And do you know where that leads? It leads right smack under a cottonwood limb."

John grinned and shoveled in more dumplings.

Steve said, "Seriously, Sells is out to get you. And he has Bender on his side. Bender is strong-headed, and a damned fool in lots of ways, but he's honest, and all the others know it. They'll do pretty much what Bender wants."

John still seemed unperturbed, but his eyes were cold and speculative. He had

risked his life in a hundred ways, but for all that he was not the suicide type. He could shake a bush as fast as the next one when the necessity arose.

"What, exactly, is he sayin' about me? That I was a road agent, and more suchlike lies?"

"That, and more. He claims you and the Parson made a deal—the Parson was supposed to guide the train to some place south of here where you have a gang waiting. White men dressed up like Indians. He says that's why you came along—to scare them south."

John chawed for a while and said, "Steve, you git back to that fire. I'll sort of keep my cayuse saddled, awaitin' developments."

After Steve left the Parson said, "You better do the high lope, John. This here's my party. If anybody's neck gets stretched it ought to be mine."

"It ought," John conceded, "but likely it won't."

He stood near the back of the wagon, watching. Steve's tall silhouette could be made out near the fire. Bender was there—his broad, whiskered head and ponderous actions making him resemble a bull buffalo. And there was Sells, and a lot more.

Their fire died to a heap of coals, and men could be seen wandering back toward their wagons, fagged after the trek and worry of the day. "Reckon I'm safe," yawned John. "The party seems to be breakin' up."

THE NIGHT was quiet. No Indian sign. Nothing much happened the next day, either. Just the overloaded wagons rolling on, kicking dust from the parched earth. Sells and his men stayed out in front, scouting for Indians. There were a couple of signal smokes, one at noon and one near sundown. The country became rolling, cut every half mile or so by deep, brush-filled coulees.

They camped in the middle of a wide swale. There were gullies, little hills, and brushy pockets around which would make excellent hiding spots for Indians, but no better place had been seen during the last hours.

An air of tenseness was on the train—even more than the night before when there had been the excitement of Sell's bullwhip and Comanche John's navy pistol.

Thunder clouds rolled up in the west. There was wind, and a few warm spatters of rain. Afterward a general grayness hung over the sky, hiding moon and stars.

One by one the fires were killed, and the wagon circle lay in deep shadow with weather-drab tops invisible a short distance away. Scouts rode out their watches in a close circle. When John lay on his straw tick in the Parson's wagon, he could hear the regular *thlot-thlot* of their horse's hoofs blending with the little sounds from the nervous camp. And distantly the yapping of coyotes—or humans giving a good imitation. John fell asleep and snored while the Parson was still tossing around in his bunk.

Yet it was Comanche John who leaped awake, a navy pistol in each hand. He had heard the first shout of "Indians!"

He kicked his feet into his jackboots, buckled on his belts, and let himself down from the rear of the wagon. Still no moon nor stars, not even the phosphorescent night glow that usually came from the horizon. In a moment, the Parson piled down behind him, dragging an ancient flintlock rifle.

John said, "Take her ca'm, Parson, and quit hoppin' around like the packrat that got lost in the roulette wheel. Stay behind that wagon wheel over yonder, and don't shoot till you see the steel of their scalpin' knives. Do much runnin' around, and these Missouri hayshakers will likely shoot you for an Injun. I don't reckon most of 'em has been in battle before."

The camp was disorderly with excitement. Children wept as frantic women dragged them from bed to hide in the poor protection of trunks, and bureaus, and what other junk they had carted from the old home. Men were running around with rifles and revolvers, letting their imagination see painted warriors in every direction.

Somebody fired. Itchy fingered. A dozen others fired because of him, all bullets wild into the surrounding dark. John grunted, got himself to one knee, and stuffed his cheek with blackjack tobacco.

"Parson, did I ever tell you about the time I was cornered by five hundred ragin' Blackfeet up on the Three Forks, when—"

"Hush up!"

John crouched, chuckling and chawing on his blackjack. Over in the middle of the circle, herded stock was milling around. The sound of them mixed with the hoofs out there on the prairie. Two or three Indian rifles cut the darkness with streaks of orange light. A bullet clipped the ground somewhere, and hummed away. There was an answering rattle of gunfire from the circle.

Up till then, the Indians had been quiet. Now their wild cries broke out, seeming to come from all directions at once. It was hard to tell if the camp was surrounded or not.

One of the scouts rode in beside the Parson's wagon, and hit the ground on the run, shouting, "White man! White man!" so no one would shoot him for an Indian.

He came back and crouched near Comanche John. John could locate him by his heavy, excited breathing as he waited for the charge to swing closer.

"They were out there in that brushy draw," he said in a half whisper. "They came crawlin' up on hands and knees. I almost rode over one of 'em. Then Johnson raised a shout, and I saw the others on their horses. Mighty near got me."

The Indians swung close, and then away again, by the sound. There was no way of telling through the dark. Not more than a dozen of them in that first group, John guessed. They were holding their fire, too, after that first flurry of shots, which was better than the wagon train was doing.

Another group sounded close, galloping, and circled. Then a glow of something out there. John recognized it. It was the light which came from coals that had been dropped in the bottom of a water-soaked buffalo quiver. Another, and another of those lights. Finally a half dozen of them.

There was a sparkle of fire as an untipped arrow was drawn from one of those quivers. It darted through the night, spiraling a trifle, breaking into flame. The burning arrow sailed inside the circle and burned itself out in the dry earth.

The next one fell short. The next struck a wagon tongue with a shower of sparks. Then two from closer range, each darting from sight through a cloth wagon top. They were quickly put out.

Darkness came again, and the whooping Indians, swinging closer. This time there was a whole shower of arrows. One of them twinkled past only a long arm's reach from John's cheek. A wagon top was blazing over to the right. Then another.

THE WAGONS were dry. They were like gunpowder from the heat of August. At first there were billows of flame from burning canvas. The fires seemed to die out for a moment with only the hoops on top burning, then the boxes would roar up.

There was no saving them. Men cramped the front wheels and pushed them outside the circle.

Firelight reached across the rolling country, casting huge shadows, making prairie dog mounds look like hills, and waist-high sage seem like groves of cottonwood. The night was filled with moving shapes—both real and imaginary.

Shooting became intermittent. The Indians seemed to have vanished. Only the distant thud of their horses sounded. Comanche John chawed calmly, one shoulder against an iron wagon tire, a navy pistol in each hand.

Unexpectedly there came a concerted whoop from fifty throats, and Indians were charging in from the night.

They did not circle this time. They galloped straight down on the wagons. A fury of gunfire met them. Here and there a rider toppled, but others closed the gap.

Comanche John whooped and came up with both guns rocking in his hands. His first two shots connected, smashing warriors from their mounts. The riderless horses came on, wild-eyed, digging dirt as they shied close and galloped around the circle.

The Parson blazed away with unknown results. At John's elbow, the grim-faced scout calmly downed one man, rammed a prepared load down the barrel of his rifle, and downed another.

At the next wagon, a mule skinner was cutting loose with buckshot, and his woman was adding to the total with an old horse-pistol.

Some of the warriors swung aside from this sudden blast of lead. Five of them came on, headed for a break between the Parson's Conestoga and the old, heavy-wheeled Pittsburgh next to it. They looked

huge, grotesque, inhuman, their bodies streaked with vermilion and yellow, their decorated buffalo-hide shields flung high, their rifles carried in one hand.

One of the horses shied suddenly, throwing its rider. Another horse came on, making it over the wagon tongue. John was on one knee, both navies blazing. The Parson was on his hind legs, swinging his musket with its barrel in his hands.

"Hooray for the Parson!" yipped John.

An unhorsed rider came up, screaming his war cry, tomahawk upraised. The Parson wielded his musket on him, too.

The Indians were not in overwhelming numbers, and the back of their charge now seemed to be broken. Riderless horses galloped around the circle, eyes staring at the firelight. The Indians retreated into the dark, keeping up an intermittent rifle fire. At last that died away. The battle was over.

"Thar she be," yawned John. "Nothin' like a bit o' action to stimulate the stomach. You don't suppose there's a dish of dumplings left, Parson?"

"Help yourself!" said the Parson, and ambled away on a round of the wagons to perform the duties of his Godly calling, for there had been casualties in the numbers of whites as well as Indians.

Dawn came up with a grayness turning to yellow and pink. No sign of Sioux. The vast country stretched away in primeval silence. John inspected his navies, thrust them back in their well-worn scabbards, and climbed to the wagon for some cold dumplings. Then he flopped down on the bunk and slept.

III

COMANCHE JOHN FELT A tremble of the wagon box and sat up. Sun was shining on the canvas top, filling the interior with light and morning heat. The Parson, more hollow-eyed and drawn than usual, was looking at him through the door.

"Sleepin'," grunted the Parson. "Sleepin', while I go around, viewin' scenes that would wring tears out of a dried apple."

John sat up and gave his tangled whiskers a good scratching. "You do the prayin', Parson, and I'll do the fightin'. We always got on pretty good that-a-way in the past."

"Reckon I do more fightin' than you do prayin'."

"May be."

"Old man Dudley just cashed in his chips. Iron arrowhead right through the gizzard. His womenfolk are carryin' on considerable. That Fitch fellow got killed, too, but he was a bachelor, thanks be to goodness."

"They'd have been more of 'em if it hadn't been for my navies," John growled defensively.

"Sure. Guess I didn't mind if you slept. I'm just gettin' cantankerous in my old age." He sat down with his chin in his hands and slowly weaved from side to side. "Sometimes I think I'm not long for this world, John. And I hate to think what'll happen to you when I leave it."

"There's nothin' wrong with you that a cup of coffee won't cure." John sniffed the morning air. "And there's a smell of one from Denton's wagon, yonder."

John and the Parson were having hot coffee poured by Mary Denton when her father came up the steps.

He said, "It's only fair for me to warn you two men that you're under considerable suspicion since last night's battle."

"Us?" yipped the Parson.

"Yes. You and Comanche John there."

John slammed the table with his fist. "There's some of your Christian gratitude for you, Parson! Some of your heavy prayin' church members, I'll wager. And after we went and beat back them Injuns practically double-handed."

"What's Sells sayin' about us?" asked the Parson.

"Sells thinks you're in league with the Indians. Of course, he suggested that before, only this time there seems to be a little something to substantiate it."

"What?"

"There was a white man, painted up and dressed like an Indian, among those who got killed last night."

"That doesn't prove a thing. There are plenty of white renegades and halfbreeds who have took up with the Injuns."

"Well, you know how Bender is. He's bellowing for your scalps already."

John got up, felt of his pistol butts, and walked down the steps. It was time for the wagon train to be kicking dust for Fort Landen, but only two or three of the im-

migrants had hitched up. All the men seemed to be gathered by Bender's wagon.

John ambled over that way, his disreputable black hat on the back of his head, the twin butts of his navy sixes hung wide and low. He chawed slowly as he walked, humming a bit of tune. On reaching the edge of the gathering he paused, and spat.

"Waal, what you accusin' me of this mornin'?" he asked. "Is it bigamy, hoss-stealin', or a connivance to keep wagon trains from tradin' their worn-out mules in Fort Landen at the disgraceful rate of three for one?"

Sells was over there, big and rawboned, his rear against the high wheel of a Conestoga wagon, his foot propped on the axle behind him, his bull whip coiled in his massive right hand. Blackfoot, the breed, was at one side, his face flat and expressionless. Alvis Tucker and the bewhiskered, dirty-toothed Lesh were on the other side where they would be most useful in case of an emergency.

John pretended not to notice. He stood there, slouched, his eyelids drooping. Bender came forward a step or two, shaking his big, reddish head like a bull bison, his voice sounding in a rumble.

"There was a white man killed on the prairie last night. A white man dressed in Injun clothes and Injun paint."

"Maybe he was a Fort Landen Injun," drawled John.

Sells moved suddenly, his quick rage showing on his face; then he restrained himself.

Bender roared, "What do you mean?"

"Just what you think I mean—that it would be just as easy for Sells to connive with the Injuns as me. But you're wrong both ways from the eight-spot. There ain't neither of us connivin' with the Injuns. Your whole blamed swaybacked, busted-down outfit wouldn't be worth it."

One of the mule skinners—a runt with copper-colored face blotches—fired up at this insult,

"Is that so! Well, we got plenty of beans along, and spuds, and seed wheat, and flour. Guess they'd be worth a pretty penny at the prices I hear about up in them hell-roarin' Montana gold towns."

"They'd be worth as much to Sells as they would be to me."

NO ONE said anything for a moment. They all seemed to be thinking it over. Even Bender. It wasn't going quite the way Sells had planned. That was plain on his long, horselike face as he started to walk away from the wagon.

Alvis Tucker moved a step into the clear, his thumb hooked in his gun belt. Lesh and Blackfoot stayed where they were, alert and watchful.

John could see the deadfall that was being set for him, although he seemed as relaxed and indolent as ever. Sells was no match for him with a navy, and he knew it. He would not go for his gun. He wouldn't try to swing the whip, either. As for Lesh, it would take a moment to toss that rifle barrel around. Blackfoot was powerful but clumsy, and more at home with a bowie or tomahawk. It was Alvis Tucker he would have to watch like a hawk.

Sells spoke, his voice distinct enough for everyone in the circle to hear. "You framed this attack—you and your so-called Parson. You're a dirty renegade and a thief—"

"Why, them is fightin' words." John pursed his lips and let out a stream of tobacco juice, rolling up the alkali-white dust an inch or two from the toes of Sells' horsehide boots. "Yep — fightin' words..."

He seemed to be only watching Sells, but Alvis Tucker was in the corner of his eye. He saw Tucker swing his arm loosely, recognized the little, quick tension of muscles that telegraphed the draw.

There appeared to be nothing hurried about John's response. It was a movement —careless and easy, a hitch of the shoulder. He didn't even leave off his tobacco chewing. Yet a navy pistol had appeared in his right hand. It seemed to hesitate a bare fraction of a second. It bucked and roared to life.

John was still facing Sells, but his eyes were frozen on Alvis Tucker.

Tucker went forward on bent knees, and plowed face first into dirt and buffalo grass, his navy spinning from his loose fingers.

Blackfoot was on his toes, but he quickly raised his hands to show he was not going for his gun. Lesh was crouched forward, rifle poised at a forty-five degree

angle. Sells, who had been set to draw, retreated a step. This, during the seconds that the shot rattled away and the sodbusters clawed for cover.

The Parson ran up, shaking his wild gray hair. He drew up abruptly and stared at the limp form of Tucker.

"John!"

"Yep, I did it. Me and my navy. A clean case of self-defense, Parson. No more sinful than that clip on the head you fetched that Sioux warrior last night, so don't light up the fire and brimstone." John slid the navy back in its low, tied-down holster, and ambled back toward the Parson's wagon, never quite losing sight of the men around him.

An observer might have thought John was going to the wagon for a nap, or a bite of breakfast, but once inside all his slouching indolence left him. He fell to work rapidly, dumping Indian meal and jerky in a sack, replenishing his supply of powder and ball.

"Share and share alike is my motto," he muttered as he helped himself liberally to the Parson's stores.

He let himself down from the far side of the wagon and saddled his Nez Perce pony. Then he crouched down and watched from beneath the wagon. Bender was over there, bellowing and flinging his arms around like a Confederate orator. Apparently there was still plenty of time, so John fed his pony a hatful of Indian meal.

Mary came to the rear door of Cy Denton's wagon and shaded her eyes against the morning sun to watch what was going on. She saw John and came over.

She said, "I saw it all, and I don't blame you a bit. That Alvis Tucker—he's a killer. Steve heard that back in Fort Laramie, but none of the men would believe him."

"He ain't a killer no more."

She seemed worried, "They're going to cause trouble for you. I wouldn't be surprised if they wanted to...to..."

"To hang me? Laws, gal, there's been a heap o' men with them kind of idees, but I still got one of the solidest necks betwixt here and Orofino."

Bender had left off orating. He hurried up the steps to his wagon. In a few seconds he came out, strapping on an extra pistol.

"Waal, now!" muttered John. "I reckon this means goodbye."

HE PUT a jackboot in the stirrup and swung to his pony's back. One of the mule skinners caught sight of him and shouted. The skinner drew a heavy, double-barrelled pistol and fired. The pistol was loaded with buck, and fifty yards was long range for its powder charge, but there was still plenty of sting left in the pellets.

A couple of them struck the pony. He snorted and left the ground twisting. John tried to straighten him out for the open country.

Everyone seemed to be running in his direction. There were more shots. Even with the pony cavorting like he was, John could hear bullets buzzing like yellowjackets.

The pony plunged around the wagon, tried to clear the tongue, knocked himself sidewise on the tree, and spilled John face foremost on the ground. John came up, dragging a length of harness around his shoulders. Three or four skinners were covering him.

"Stick up yore hands!" roared Bender.

John looked into the barrels of several pistols. He lifted his hands, taking time to call that Nez Perce pony every swear word west of Tennessee.

An excited, gun-waving mob surrounded him. Bender's coarse voice could be heard over everybody's. He had a navy in his hand and was gesturing with it,

"There's the killer! We'll show him he can't shoot down one of our guides and git away with it! The low-down road agent! String him up, I say..."

"Every man deserves a trial," the Parson was saying.

"To hell with a trial. What's the need o' wastin' all that time? We all seen him do it. What we want is justice, and fast justice, too. Winters, you go git that picket rope."

John whipped some dust from his homespuns and allowed himself to be prodded along by three bullwhackers who had taken over as guards.

"Sure you don't need some help tyin' the

knot?" he asked of Bender. "Them California collars is tricky businesses."

Bender stopped, one hand on his hip, the other swinging the big pistol. "Maybe you don't think we'll go through with this hangin'?"

"Reckon you will, all right. But it's every condemned man's right to have a good, clean drop with a knot tied right and hooked up right. That's all I'm askin'—"

"And that's what you'll get."

The Parson was still remonstrating, but nobody would listen to him. Even Cy Denton stood to one side, looking severe.

"Can't you do something?" wailed the Parson.

Denton shook his head. "Maybe you didn't see it—he just drew his gun and shot that poor Tucker fellow right between the eyes. And why he did it, I can't guess. Tucker seemed to be a quiet fellow. He was standing there, not saying a word."

"Standin' over there drawing his gun to shoot John on the sly!"

"Why, he just barely got his hand on his gun."

"Sure, that's how fast John is. He happened to see that skunk from the side of his eye, and—"

But the Parson might as well have been talking to the endless western skies. No one would listen to him.

John kept his arms high while his guns were unbuckled and tossed over against a wagon wheel. He seemed to be at ease, watching while a hangman's knot was twisted up, while a wagon tongue was laid across the tops of two covered wagons, while a barrel was rolled out to make a drop.

Sells and his two remaining henchmen kept to one side, watching, letting the honest mule skinners and farmers do the work.

"Looks like you win, Sells," John chawed, lifting his hands in a sad gesture.

Sells moved away from the high wagon wheel where he was leaning, and pulled himself to his magnificent six feet three.

"It's a habit I got," he said smugly.

"Mighty fine habit. Might-ee fine!"

COMANCHE John sighed, and seemed to be resigned to this fate of his, but his eyes, beneath their drooping lids, were as hard and quick as ever.

He could see his guns over there by the wagon wheel. It was about a dozen strides. His Nez Perce pony had calmed down and was tied to the wheel on the other side. But the three guards stayed alert, guns in their hands.

He tried to edge over a little, but a mule-skinner with a shot-loaded double-pistol drew down on him.

"Back where you was, Comanche John, and no funny business."

John seemed grieved, "I aim to git hung peaceful, as a man o' good character should."

The barrel was set up beneath the crosspiece now. The noose with its grotesque spiral knot was dangling. Back on the ground, a man was pulling the noose up to the right height.

The Parson had disappeared. In a moment he came in sight down the back steps of his wagon, carrying his battered Bible. He paused a few steps away and intoned in a graveyard voice, "Short and full o' pain is the life o' man born o' woman!"

"Amen!" responded John.

The Parson bowed to the others, "Will you kindly retire to a respectful distance so I can give this unfortunate condemned man some private consolation in these, his final moments upon the earth?"

A trifle awed by the sincere sadness of the Parson's manner, the guards commenced to obey. Sells was suspicious. He cried. "This is some sort of a trick!"

Over by the hangman's barrel somebody shouted, "Look out! He's got a pistol back of his—"

But the Parson, using his Bible as a blind, had drawn the pistol and now held it in his hand. It was an old-time horse pistol with a barrel large as a four-bit piece. Its hammer was cocked and the Parson's finger was crooked around the trigger. His arm shook as though with chills.

"I ain't much of a marksman," he informed them in a wild voice, "but a man don't need to be with a scattergun and two ounces of squaw-shot. Make a move and, so help me, I'll blast the spinal backbones right out of ye. Drop them guns!"

Nobody had ever seen the Parson like this. His sincerity was beyond doubt. There was a saying—"Never argue with a woman or an armed preacher." The guards drop-

ped their guns, and lifted their hands for good measure. Sells started forward, but the Parson drew a bead on him, and he dug his boots in an abrupt stop.

John galloped toward the wheel where his navies lay.

All this took only a few seconds. It was ridiculous—one old man against all of them. The short, copper-freckled skinner ducked out of sight and came up with a pepper-pot pistol in his hand. Just then Steve James rode up, leading an extra horse. He glimpsed the freckled man, drew, and fired. Steve probably had aimed to kill, but his bullet went low, smashing through the fellow's legs and knocking him to the ground beneath the wagon.

John snatched up his belts, drawing one of the guns. There was no doubt about the command of the situation then. Steve nudged his horse between the wagons, untied the Nez Perce pony and led him out. John tossed the belts over the saddle horn and mounted without taking his intent eyes off the crowd. The Parson got on the spare horse. They three rode slowly between the wagons.

No sound was made during these moments except for the little crunch of buffalo grass beneath hoofs and the tinkle of bit chains. There was a general exhalation when they passed out of sight.

Hoofs thudded in a sudden gallop. Bender commenced to shout. He leaped between the wagons, drawing his pistol. Comanche John wheeled in his saddle and aimed a bullet that sent him clawing for cover. Sells bobbed down beneath the wagon box firing and cursing, long after the men were beyond range of both voice and bullet lead.

He stood up, and commenced pushing loads into the chambers of his pistols. After a while the signs of anger left his face, and he commenced looking satisfied with himself. After all, wasn't it better the way it had turned out? Hadn't he ridded himself of three trouble-makers in one batch? Now, if the Sioux would hold off for three or four days until he could nurse this creaking outfit with its half-dead stock to Fort Landen...

Sells walked away, making plans for that deal. He'd be tougher than usual this time. The train couldn't go on to Idaho without fresh stock. He'd demand four mules for one. That would mean some of the wagons would be left behind. He'd fat up the stock on that good, Landen valley grass, repair the wagons, and trade them at the gold camps in Montana country. Oh, there was good profit in these pilgrims if a man knew how to handle them!

IV

COMANCHE JOHN PULLED HIS pony down to a trot as soon as it was obvious there would be no pursuit. From atop a knoll he and his two companions could look back on the circled wagons. Already the men were scattering, hitching mule strings, getting ready to push on across the hill trail to Fort Landen.

"Think they'll ever make it?" Steve asked.

There was worry in his voice. John knew the reason. It was on account of that girl back there. With the excitement of escape over, he had time to think about the Sioux. It probably seemed to him that he was abandoning her. The Parson apparently felt about the same.

"Shucks," drawled John, "they stood off the Sioux once, they'll do it again. There's been plenty of wagon strings smaller than that one pulled through while the Sioux and Crows was on the prod."

They rode for a couple of hours with John in the lead. They had no destination —they just kept in the general direction of that gap in the mountains where Fort Landen lay. The wagon train dropped out of sight, but when they paused to look back, there would always be a rising haze of dust to give its general location.

John pulled his pony down and pointed a grimy finger off toward a purplish cluster of mountains to the north-west.

"Yonder, beyond them hills a piece, is the Salt River Range. And, after that, the Snake. Then, to the northwards, cross some lava plains and you come to the Lemhi. And, after that, the gold camps of the Salmon. I always had a longin' to see them camps."

He watched Steve from the corner of his eye. "Gold! That's the stuff. Pretty, and yaller, and easy to carry. She weights down a man's pants good, and makes him feel like somethin'. Gold is different from

wheat, or turnips. You can bury her and leave her for a hundred years, and she won't rot. You can throw her in the fire, and burn her till doomsday, and then you can pan the ashes, and she'll still be thar. Every color. Like the Parson said in one o' his sermons—'Lay up your treasures not in greenbacks which moths and dust do corrupt; put her in gold a thousand fine.' You don't want to go farmin', son. Farmin' is for squaws and Chinee. You come with me and we'll go for the yaller gold!"

"By moonlight!" snorted the Parson.

"No, Parson, not by moonlight. I admit to stickin' up a coach or three, here and there, and now and then, as the song about me says. But I never asked a young man to jine me. I ain't one to lead youth astray. My conscience wouldn't stand for it. Besides, an inexperienced hand always scrambles the job. How about that there gold, Steve?"

Steve shook his head, "Sorry, John. I think I'll string along in sight of that wagon train. You understand how it is."

"Sure," said John sadly. "Reckon I understand."

He said no more about the gold camps camps of the Salmon. The three men rode on through the rising country, keeping to the timber that fringed the long ridges, pausing at hill promontories to watch for Injun sign.

Back of them a smoke signal strung up through the still, hot air. Perhaps it was marking the position of the train. A second smoke rose in the north half an hour later. Then a third, almost lost from sight in the far distance.

"Sioux?"

"Or Crow, or Blackfeet, which is just as bad," John answered, watching that distant smoke from beneath the brim of his hat. "You know, some ways of lookin' at it, them Injuns is might nigh as smart as humans. Look at this pony express. Takes might nigh onto a week to get a message from Fort Hall to Leavenworth. Give a dozen Injuns an armload of green sagebrush apiece and they'd get her through from dawn to dark."

At twilight they paused by a trickle of cold water and baked stick-bread over a little, smokeless fire of aspen twigs. Five or six miles back along the valley they could see the twinkle of camplight where the train had paused for the night.

The hours of darkness passed without the sounds of gunfire, so evidently the Sioux had not returned. Morning came, and the three men decided to push on to Fort Landen ahead of the wagon train.

About mid-afternoon, Comanche John wheeled his horse abruptly into the aspen brush that formed a solid wall along the trail. The Parson stopped to peer ahead.

"Injuns, ye danged fool," John muttered.

THE PARSON saw them then—a half-dozen warriors, dressed only in breechclouts and moccasins, carrying rifles, and bows and arrows, and painted buffalo-bill shields. They were a hundred paces away, just visible through the overhanging brush.

Steve made it down in John's tracks without attracting their notice. The Parson tried to urge his horse, but the animal was balky. The Parson quirted him. The horse snorted and crashed down through the dry brush.

One of the warriors whooped and wheeled his horse in circles, signaling behind him with upraised thumb. A couple of others pointed their half-wild ponies toward a small, rocky promontory from which they could look down on the creek bed.

A little, yard-wide stream appeared and disappeared among the bramble. Beyond was a steep bank where fungus-grown basaltic rock poked out.

John splashed his horse up the stream as far as the brush tangle would let him. There was a lot of shouting up the trail, and the thud of galloping horses. He turned and climbed the bank. After twenty or thirty yards, the bottoms opened up a little—a grassy meadow with little bowers of chokecherry and thornapple.

The Indians were behind somewhere, fanning through the bushes. John turned right, leading the way around some talus rocks which had rolled from the steep hillside. A grassy shoulder of the hill gave them a chance to gallop.

But they had no protection there. They were in full view of the Indians back on the trail. One of them drew a bead with his long-barrelled flintlock. John snapped a shot from the hip. The ball must

have burned the rump of the Indian's pony by the way he lit out bucking.

Once over that shoulder, the cries of the warriors seemed far away—farther and farther as a mat of spruce timber sponged up the sound. A deer trail led them around the hill, climbing continuously. They came to the edge of the timber and looked down.

The valley was revealed for a considerable distance. Right below, eighty or ninety Sioux were combing the brush. But they were only a part of the total force. There must have been two hundred more strung along up the trail.

"Ge-hosophat!" marveled John. "Look at the size of that war party."

A force of a hundred armed warriors was considered an unusually large one. Three hundred on the prowl was a few more than John had stomach for.

John noticed that Steve was looking at him. The anguished expression in the young man's eyes made him uncomfortable.

"Think they'll stand a chance?" asked Steve.

"The wagon train? Not if those Injuns get 'em strung out in the valley. They'll come down from two sides at once and cut 'em to pieces."

"Then I'm going back to warn them."

"Me, too!" said the Parson. "You better go on to Fort Landen, John. I don't expect your neck would be very safe around that train just yet."

"Neither would yours without me along. I'll take care of myself all right."

There was a sweep of open country to the north of this wooded hill. The horses took it at a stiff gallop. They swung back to the valley trail several miles east. There were no Indians in sight there. They kept on, gallop and trot, as fast as the horses could take it.

The sun was dipping toward the hills when the wagon train came in sight, creeping along at its turtle's pace. Sells was in the lead, riding his big chestnut horse. Blackfoot was a few paces behind, and Lesh came galloping alongside a few moments later.

"Oh, for a two-pounder cannon and a pocketful of grape!" moaned John, looking at those three varmints.

Sells drew rein and watched, his face going ugly from frustration and rage when he recognized who it was. He would probably have gone for his guns if it had only been the Parson and Steve, but the presence of Comanche John made him change his mind.

"Well?" he demanded in a harsh voice.

"Why, how-de-do," said John, jolting to a stop and looking at Sells with a sour twist to his lips. "How ye comin' with your knot-tyin' these days?"

Sells let the jibe go, holding his temper. He was wondering why these men had risked their lives by coming back. He waited for some explanation, but none was offered. The Parson drew up for a second, then started on impatiently toward the approaching wagons. John, however, stayed where he was.

"Comin'?" shouted the Parson.

"Believe I'd rather stay here and let the train catch up. They's some folks I don't fancy turnin' my back on."

BENDER was jolting along in the high seat of that first wagon. His jaw was thrust out, and veins were corded on his forehead when he looked down on them.

"What the tarnation—" he started, pulling up on the ribbons, giving them a twist around the handbrake. His old lady, a tall, drab woman poked her head through the peep-hole and said something, but Bender quieted her with an impatient glance over his shoulder. He never let womenfolk interfere with the way he ran the outfit.

"This means hangin', you understand?" he roared at Comanche John. "We won't have you here. None of you—"

"Hold on now, Bender," the Parson cackled, shaking his head like an animated scarecrow. "We didn't come back here because we had any hankerin' for your company. We came back here to warn you of an Injun war party we run across eight, ten mile up the trail."

Bender placed a foot on the high, front wheel and let himself to the ground, grunting after the manner of big men who are called on to exert themselves too much. He heard the words "war party" and squinted suspiciously into the Parson's eyes.

"What say?"

"I said there was a war party of Sioux up the trail yonder eight or ten mile, you unwashed idiot! Hundreds of 'em!"

"Hundreds?"

"That's what I said—hundreds. There's three hundred if there's a one."

The next wagon had pulled up beside Bender's, filling the trail. Two or three after it came to a stop. Mule skinners walked up wearily in their dusty, patched boots. Sells saw he had an audience, so he shouted his opinion of the Parson's tale with a coarse burst of laughter,

"Three hundred! Of all the damned lies!"

His tone raised spirits a little. The thought of three hundred armed savages was enough to make a man's guts crawl around like a bundle of snakes. Especially when you had a woman and young 'uns back in the wagon. But perhaps, as Sells said, it was only a lie—just another story cooked up by John and the Parson to scare them into going south.

Sells went on, jeering, "If you'd made it seventy-five, Parson, maybe some of us would have believed you. But *three hundred!* Why, that's an army. It's more Sioux warriors than you'd find by combin' the country west of Fort Laramie."

"Maybe they ain't Sioux, but they're Injuns, and they're primed to take white men's hair, judgin' by the reception they gave us—"

"Stick to one story, Parson. Maybe they was Chinooks from over the mountains."

The mule skinners burst into laughter. The Parson heard them, and his rage mounted to Old Testament proportions. He rode close to Sells, shaking his bony fist.

"Laugh, gol dang ye! But remember this—there's women and kids back yonder in them wagons! Women and kids to be run down, and tomahawked, and scalped. You're a man. You ain't got a family. You got a fast hoss. You can light out if this business turns into a massacre, just like you did that time before when—"

There was that accusation again—the one Sells could not endure. He reached out, throttling the Parson, twisting his linsey shirt, snapping his old gray head back and forth. Then he stopped abruptly and released him. His eyes had traveled over to Comanche John whose right arm was dangling very loose and whose eyes had become thin and cold as on that day when he had sent a bullet through Alvis Tucker's forehead.

More men were coming up, and Sells shouted to them, "Do you hear the story they've cooked up now? Not *thirty* Injuns, or *fifty* like maybe attacked us the other night. No sir-ee! They come along with three hundred. All of 'em Sioux! Why, that's more'n three times as many Injuns as I ever saw in one single war party in all the twelve years I been fightin' 'em."

Sells probably did think it was a lie. The Parson turned to the others and wailed, "Listen here, I saw 'em! Have I ever told a lie to you about anything? Have I?"

Sells had an answer for that, too—"You sort of lied when you came out hidin' that pistol under your Bible the other day, Parson."

The Parson turned to Bender, "Well, what do you aim to do?"

"Why, go on to Fort Landen, of course."

"I won't let you! I won't allow you to bull-head this train right into a massacre. There's women and kids along—"

John said impatiently, "Come on, Parson! You're just wearin' out your lungs."

"Ding blast their hides—"

"Let's git."

"Oh, no you dont!" roared Bender. "We got a score to settle with you, Comanche John. You're a killer, and you got hangin' comin'—"

"Why, so I have."

JOHN hitched his left leg up around the horn of his saddle and looked around at the men on the ground, chawing with considerable amusement. "A-course, you ain't exactly got me in irons yet. And maybe I got some objections. Twelve of 'em. The exact number of slugs in my navies. You know, it might be interestin' at that—just to see how many I could get with twelve pistol balls."

"You can't bullyrag this whole train." Bender said it as though he meant it, but neither he nor any of the others made a move for their guns. He looked beyond John at Steve James. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Steve. Throwin' in with a road agent. I wonder what your paw would think of you if he was alive today?"

"Those Indians are out there, Bender. I saw them, or I wouldn't have risked my hide coming back."

"Lies! Throw in with road agents, and

now lie for 'em. I've listened to all I'm goin' to. Git out of the trail, all three of you! Hit for the timber, because if you're here at camp time, so help me I'll see that all three of you is hung!"

He placed a heavy boot on the hub and climbed back to the seat. His old woman, who had listened to all this, spoke to him, "Paw, I'm scared they're tellin' the truth."

"You go back thar! Get to mixin' your biscuits, that's woman's work. I've brung you this far safe and sound, and I'll get you the rest of the way. I ain't a man that goes around askin' other folks' advice."

Bender's wife pulled her head back inside. He swung his whip across the backs of his eight-mule string. "Git-ap!" he bellowed. "It's ho! for Fort Landen and the green fields of I-dee-ho!"

The Parson shouted over the rattle of draw-chains and the creak of the wagon, "Re-collect the days that the Bible tells about! Re-collect the deluge! They laughed at Noah, too, and behold!—there was destruction across the face of the earth—"

"Go jump in the crick, Noah!" laughed Sells raucously, feeling mighty good over the way it had turned out. "You better get to goin' in your ark before them five hundred Injuns catch up with you."

"Circle those wagons! They'll cut this train up in chunks and—"

"Git-ap!" bellowed Bender.

Bender's string started up the trail, the next wagon fell in, and so on down the line. The Parson was forced to draw back and let them roll by. Most of the men were laughing and talking to one another—but a trifle more loudly than was necessary just to keep their confidence up. There was a little suspicion that the Parson *might* have been telling the truth. In fact, one skinny man who rode astraddle one of his wheel-mules came right out with his suspicions. He growled, "Well, it wouldn't hurt to circle up here and scout around, would it? Just in case?"

"Thar goes your flock, Parson," John said, chawing slowly.

"Just like the children of Israel," the Parson moaned. "Following false prophets with a jeer on their lips, never dreamin' of the lightnin' that's about to fall."

"What do you aim to do?"

"Why, stay here and do the best I can."

"How about you, Stevie?"

Steve was watching for Denton's wagon and did not even hear the question.

John gave his leg a disgusted whack. "Then I'll stay, too. But I call it outrageous—a man of my reputation, ridin' to doom for the sake of a flock o' pilgrims who tried to hang him and then sneered in his face. I always thought I'd go down to glory, both guns blazin', robbin' a six-horse stagecoach double-guarded—"

"Hush up!" The Parson was impatient. He kept watching the faces of scared women and kids that looked from the backs of covered wagons. No laughter there about his three hundred Indians!

V

THE WAGONS ROLLED through some rocky narrows, slowly, their numbers seeming like an elongated serpent. Beyond those narrows, the valley was fairly straight, with hills coming down, forming a gentle V. There were patches of spruce and pine here and there, with yellowish aspen trees growing along the stream bed.

Four scouts worked the country up ahead, staying closer than they had out on the prairie. A half-hour of this. An hour. The sun was dipping toward the timbered horizon up the valley. There was no breeze. Toward the north a half-dozen eagles were flying in steep circles. John, who had been riding near Denton's wagon, pulled up to watch them. The Parson stopped, too.

"Carrion, likely," said John.

But he saw something else—a patch of servisberry with tops waving. Waving—but there was no breeze. He spurred forward, and drew up by Bender's wagon.

"Injun sign, Bender!"

Bender was tempted to ignore the warning, but something about John's manner told him not to. One of the scouts must have suspected something, for he wheeled and rode back across the hillside. His horse reared, and broke into a frightened run, and the scout went over his side, fingers clutching his chest. He had been struck through by an iron-tipped arrow.

"Injuns!" bellowed John.

Bender's old woman screamed, and that scream carried more force than anything John could shout. The hillside still seemed

deserted for a few seconds—and then, in twenty places, it came to life.

Indians appeared from nowhere—from among little clumps of rose thorn, from behind rocks. Several were within stone's throw of the trail and yet had escaped notice of the scouts.

These closest ones sent a hail of bullets and arrows into the wagons. A driver fell from his high seat, frightening his mule string. They snorted, plunging into the rear of the wagon ahead of them, jerkline and straps in a tangle, leaders down with swing team and wheelers trampling over them. They got up and ripped to one side, going through brush down the steep bank of the creek with the wagon careening behind them.

High on the hillside the main body of the Sioux appeared, riding from a patch of spruce timber. They did not gallop as they would have back on the prairie. The ground was too rough and rock-strewn. They came in a rapid, zig-zag trot.

Bender wheeled his lead team, trying to turn the first segment of the train and form some sort of a circle, but this was a prairie tactic. It was impossible to form a circle here with the creek on one side.

Comanche John looked back along the line. The wagons were ramming one another, making a perfect mix-up for the Sioux to butcher.

Cursing all pilgrims, he spurred back, bellowing for drivers to turn their teams toward the creek and in that way to form several tight groups with the stern ends of the Conestogas pointed toward the hillside. Wagons like that could put up a mean fight—especially with the steep creek bank to be defended on the other side.

A hundred yards of open hillside now separated the charging Indians from the trail. Out of the melee of frightened animals and pitching Conestogas came a burst of rifle fire. Here and there a warrior fell from his horse; the rest came on, pushing to a gallop from the rock-strewn slope. Handbrakes were set and drivers jumped to the ground, setting up a devastating criss-cross of bullets.

The fighting became savage, with every man for himself, with no man knowing what the fellow at the next wagon was doing. And, somehow, the Indians were turned back.

Comanche John had been crouched in the protection of a wagon wheel, shooting and reloading until the barrels of his navies were hot to the touch. He got to his feet and looked around. The sun had dipped beyond the mountains, so the battle had lasted longer than he thought. Three quarters of an hour, perhaps.

Whites and Indians had fallen among the wagons, but the kids had been safe enough behind those high, hardwood planks of the Conestogas, and with furniture and feather ticks stacked around to boot. Nothing like feather ticks to stop rifleball or arrowhead.

FROM the hillsides, Indians kept up a steady, long-range popping. Night settled in with none of the usual dinnertime cheer. No cookfires. Only a dinky mass of coals beneath the overhanging creek bank where the Parson kept water boiling for use in his rude surgery.

Finally the desultory gunfire died away. There was silence—a tight, uneasy silence. Minutes would go by. A rifle would send out a streak of flame, starting a rattle around the rocky hillsides, then silence again. The wagoners crouched behind hasty barricades, watching and listening. The moon came up, lighting the country.

John slouched over to find the Parson. His fire had become a heap of ash-covered coals, and he was gone. Visiting one of the bereaved families, likely.

Up at Bender's wagon he heard Sells say something. Bender answered shortly, his voice gruff. John went back and sat by the wagon wheel. He dozed, and came away at sound of a new fury of gunfire at the forward end of the train. To the north, the moonlit hillside was filled with movement.

A dozen Indians charged in from nowhere, screaming war cries. John cut loose with his navies. A skinner with a sawed-off shotgun lent a hand. More came—and more. The middle of the train was cut by charging Sioux. A group of skinners battled them away—first with bullets, and then with rifles swung like clubs.

Finally the Indians retreated, still shouting, firing guns and arrows from the shadows. Their charge had been turned—but they would be back for more. No one doubted that.

Bender got up, kicking the stiffness from his knees. He loaded his pistol, thrust it in his belt, and laid the rest of his armaments against the wagon wheel. Then he started down the creek to see how the rest of the people were faring.

His wagon formed the keystone of a group of six. After these, there was an opening for fifteen or twenty strides in the middle of which Sells and his two henchmen had built a little barricade of furniture and endgates. At the moment, no one was manning it.

Four or five men were over by McMeel's wagon. Someone was wounded, and the wound was being probed, from the fuss he was making. He recognized Comanche John's voice, offering advice.

Bender walked along, thinking over the events of the last three weeks. He knew now that Comanche John had been on the square. He knew that the Parson had been right in advising the south trail by way of Jim Bridger's. And he knew that he, Bender, had been a stubborn fool, that he had let Sells dupe him, and lead him through the worst Indian country in the West just so he could trade a few mules and supplies.

Bender was on his way to look at the wounded man when a sound just beyond the steep cut of the creek made him listen. It was the jingle of bit chains, the stamp of a horse on soft earth. He walked through a low growth of buckbrush and looked down. It was shadowy, but he could make out a dark, rangy horse, and a man standing beside him, pulling the latigo of a saddle tight.

Bender started down the bank. It was steeper than he expected, and the loose dirt caved with him. He slid to the bottom. Dust rose, blinding him for a second. Then he recognized Sells.

He knew what Sells was about. He had lost his guts. Either that, or he had given up hope of ever getting the train through and decided it was just a poor business gamble. Anyway, he was saddling to try a sneak through the Indian lines. He was doing the exact thing the Parson said he would.

Sells whirled around when he heard Bender behind him. "Blackfoot?" he asked.

Then he recognized Bender, crashing towards him through the knee-high brush, drawing his pistol as he came.

"What the devil?" Sells cried.

Bender cursed him. "So you're running out! The Parson was right about you all the time. You're a coward like he said. You'd take us through to Fort Landen if it came handy, and run out on us if it didn't!"

"Point that gun some other way."

"It's pointed where it should be. I'm goin' to shoot your guts out, Sells!"

SELLS had no doubt that Bender meant what he said. He argued, stalling for time, for a few minutes until Blackfoot or Lesh could come up.

"You're wrong, Bender. Listen—I can see how it looks, me down here saddling up. But I wasn't running out. I was going to take my life in my hands and sneak through to the fort for help. It's only one night's ride over there if you know all the shortcuts—"

"A night's ride! It's a three-day ride!"

"No, Bender, listen. I wasn't running out."

"It's no use, Sells. I'm going to—"

"Bender, don't make a mistake. You'd never forgive yourself if you killed me and then found out the truth . . ."

Sells could see a man approaching along the creek—a big fellow who trod the soft dirt on noiseless moccasins—Blackfoot.

Sells raised his voice so Blackfoot would know what was going on, "Bender, don't kill me! Give me half a minute, anyway. My God! at least give me time to pray!"

Blackfoot drew up a dozen steps and slowly lifted the percussion rifle in his hands. Bender couldn't see him. Sells knelt down as though to pray. The rifle roared, smashing Bender forward. He staggered a few steps with his pistol dangling in his hand, and plowed face first into the dirt. The slug had torn his heart.

"What the hell?" asked Blackfoot, coming up and looking at the saddled horse.

"I wasn't going to run out and leave you here," Sells said defensively.

"Oh, no? Then where's my horse?"

"Find your own damned horse. He's over there in the brush. Maybe Lesh is bringin' him."

Blackfoot grunted, lowering his rifle. It was a double, one barrel rifled, and one

barrel for shot, and he still had the shot for anyone who tried to doublecross him.

"Think we can get through them Sioux?" he asked.

"How do I know? We stand a better chance on the run than we do holed up here. This train will be cut to ribbons before the night is over."

Blackfoot turned and started through the bushes for his horse. Sells watched him darkly, but waited.

Over by the wagons, Comanche John had heard Blackfoot's shot and seen the flash it made. A peculiar thing about that flash—it was pointed straight down the wagon train. A man shooting at an Indian would have pointed the other way. He noticed that Sells and his two men were not around. He walked to the edge of the bank.

There he caught sight of Sells, standing beyond his saddled horse. Sells saw him at the same time. Sells would have drawn and fired, but the horse was between them. He didn't care to expose himself by standing high and shooting across the horse's back. So he bent over, keeping the animal between them.

"Blackfoot!" he called.

Blackfoot turned. Lesh was coming up from the creek, leading his horse. They both heard Sells, and then saw John silhouetted there at the crest of the bank.

Lesh went for the pistol at his belt, and Blackfoot started around with his rifle. John's navies were out. They roared, right and left, with only a fraction of time between them. Blackfoot was hit. He dropped his rifle and crashed away, falling through dry brush. Lesh had leaped aside, and John's second bullet missed.

Lesh went to the ground shoulder first. Lying on his side he pulled the trigger, aiming at that place on the bank where John had been a second before.

But John had slid to the bottom. He remained there, guns drawn and back pressed against the dirt. He was quiet for a few seconds. Then Lesh saw something—or thought he did. He shot. The light that leaped from the muzzle of his gun revealed him momentarily. John squeezed the trigger of his right-hand navy, and a gunfighter's instinct told him that the bullet had connected.

SELLS had been edging around his horse for a set-up shot. The horse became frightened at the shooting and commenced to plunge. Sells tried to keep a grip on the bridle, but he was flung to the ground. His gun was knocked from his fingers. He made a frenzied clutch across the dark earth for them—and then he glimpsed John above him, navies in his hands. Instantly, he sprang from the ground, tangling with John, carrying him back, forcing those two navies high and out of the way.

Comanche John was strong, but he was no match for Sells. No man in that wagon train, not even the dead Bender himself, would have been a match for Sells in a simple contest of strength.

He twisted the navies from John's grasp. They fell to earth. Sells thrust him on, trying to pin him against the bank. John went suddenly backward with collapsed legs, striking the ground, carrying Sells off balance.

Sells would have landed on him, but John, quick as a bobcat, doubled his legs, and drove his heavy jackboots into Sells' abdomen. The big man was lifted from his feet. He staggered back over his own heels. He struck the dirt bank and fell.

John had no idea of giving him a chance to rise. There could be none of your polite formalities about this fight. It was to be to the finish, and no quarter given. John charged, intending to swing his jackboots to Sells' head.

Sells was sick from the blow he had taken, but he still had strength left to get up and clamber the bank. John followed. Sells ran toward the barricade, looking for a weapon. His bull whip was there, coiled where he had left it. He snatched it up and set himself. Its long lash snaked out, aimed for John's eyes, but John fended it off with his forearm. He retreated, looking from side to side for a weapon—any weapon.

A gun was leaning against a wagon wheel where someone had left it. And up above, in its socket by the high seat, was a whip.

Sells came to a stop, thinking John was going for that rifle. Instead, John came around holding the whip. He swung out its heavy leather lash with a practiced swing, and drew back with a powerful

twist of back and shoulder muscles so that it echoed like a pistol.

John spoke, "You've been mighty fancy with that whip o' your'n. Might-ee fancy. But I've skinned a few mules myself. So I have a hankerin' to find out if you north-country skinners have added anythin' to the art."

Sells laughed. This was a contest he would enjoy. He advanced and swung his whip like a striking rattlesnake.

But in a test of quickness Comanche John was top dog. He spun to one side, feeling the burn against his cheek bone as the popper tore a fragment from the brim of his black slouch hat. And, while Sells' lash was still straight out, John swung his whip.

Sells saw it coming. He thought it was aimed for his head. He bent double to avoid it. Instead, the lash wrapped in sudden coils around his pivot foot. John wheeled, spilling Sells backward.

"That's the old Sacramento twist!" he yipped. "Now I'll show ye one I learnt in Ten-Spot Gulch!"

Sells struggled to his feet while the next cut of John's whip tore a fragment from his buckskin shirt. He set himself swinging with every ounce of his magnificent bulk, aiming at John's throat.

It was a killing blow. If it landed right, it could tear the jugular to pieces. But John moved the few inches that were necessary and the whip cracked past his ear. He balanced a bare fraction of a second, and then swung, guessing Sells' follow-up movement. The long lash flew out at Sells, wrapping around his neck.

John dug his heels and pulled back. Sells went down. He dropped his whip and tore at the leather coils with both hands. He got free somehow, and rolled away, gasping for breath.

Indians were whooping out there in the moonlight, charging the wagon train. Sells didn't seem to notice. He was terrified by that whip. A flaming arrow started a roll of fire in the top of a Conestoga, casting light on him as he ran toward the hillside.

He suddenly seemed to realize that he was only running from one death into another. He turned and started back. A tall Sioux warrior was right behind him.

The warrior had fired his rifle. He flung it away and slid a short-bow from his naked shoulder. Fast as an eye-wink, his hand came up from his quiver, fitting an arrow in the bow-sinew. His arm swung back with the power of shoulder and back behind it, driving the arrow until its four-inch iron head smashed bone and flesh, passing completely through Sells' chest and rattling among the spokes of a wagon wheel beyond.

Sells still ran, his legs working automatically, although death had touched his eyes. He slumped forward and lay still.

SCARCELY anybody noticed him. Not even Comanche John. He dropped his whip, leaped over to the bank to retrieve his navies, and came charging back to open up on the Sioux.

Women carried water from the creek to drench the wagons. They swung wet quilts to beat out flames. Their men fought the Sioux back with bullets, and with the stocks of their rifles when the battle became close.

At dawn there was silence. The Indians had long retreated, and at last could be seen riding a ridge to the west.

That night, under the command of Cy Denton, the train wheeled back for the prairie. They struck the old north-south trapper's trail along the eastern edge of hill country, and followed it southward in the direction of Bridger's fort.

On the fourth day they reached the deep ruts of the Oregon Trail. Then it was that Comanche John dumped a week's provisions in his saddlebags and squinted off toward the south.

"I hear plenty talk about gold comin' in big, yaller hen's eggs from gravel down Pike's Peak way," he said. "Better come along and git some, Parson."

The Parson shook his head. "No, John. Reckon I'm still needed here.

"Shucks, a locoed hoss with blinders on could find the trail to I-dee-ho, and you've preached a sufficiency of funerals to last you for a while, I reckon."

"I've preached a heap too many funerals." The Parson pointed at the high seat of a wagon where Steve James and Mary Denton were riding, "Thing I look forward to preachin' is a weddin'."

The animal screamed wildly, its head threshing against the tautness.

SIN'S RED HOT WAGES

By JOHN STARR

He was about as useful as a candle in a blizzard in this wild Wyoming territory, felt Preacher Hollingshead. Everything he said only made guns clear leather faster.

SOMETIMES, Amor Hollingshead plumb allowed, you could tell a lot about what was going on in a town just by counting the noses that were missing in church. Or at least . . .pardoning the Lord for suspicion . . .you got to wondering if there was meat stickin' to the ribs of gossip that folks were chawin'.

For instance, down front Phoebe Wallace was alone again, standing prim and straight with her starched skirt crushed in against the pine plank seat in front of her. Her brother, Eric, was among the missing. Maybe out horse thievin' the way Noah Borchard claimed he was doing. Not that Noah's word counted for much. Noah didn't attend church services either.

Amor straightened, pushing his hands along the rough sides of the pulpit stand. Wyoming plains dust lay thick along the window sills, and spilled over onto the floor. The light from the dust-stained windows was wispy white, like the rays around an eclipse.

They were singing now, and he listened mostly, keeping his voice low and indistinguishable. A man couldn't run a chance of being called a show-off preacher, especially when he was new and folks hadn't gotten onto his ways.

Phoebe Wallace's voice was clear and high-pitched, like a meadowlark singing on a sunlit day. He studied the curve of her head bent over the hymnal, the round forming of her lips with the words.

Hesper Johnson was off-key again, and from the back rows the men folks came in booming loud. It was a good song. The kind of a song a man could get his mouth into and wallow his tongue over.

Amor pushed the buckram-bound Bible inches forward on the stand, the book feeling heavy under his hands. Sometimes, he knew with stifling bitterness, a man's religion wasn't enough, what with the grapes of a new land already turning sour in Eric's mouth, and men like Noah Borchard crushing the larger sun-burst ones so that the ripe juice of the land's riches trickled over his jowls. Wyoming was still a land where men fought over the things the Lord had left to them, and most ways it wasn't good preachin' territory. There was a time for preaching the Lord's word, and there was a time for fighting for it, and now was a fightin' time. He'd be much better at the side of men like Eric Wallace than he would standing apart in a church pulpit, tonguing words that men didn't have time to heed.

He looked again at Phoebe. The song crashed against the ceiling of the church, and dwindled away riding the crest of its own echoes. Phoebe's head came up slowly from the book, her eyes round and sober, her skirts still crinkled against the plank seat. Hidden by the shadows of the seat, he knew, were Phoebe's black satin, high-lacing, high-heeled shoes. Phoebe was a pious girl but she put a heap of store in little things like high-lacing shoes. She wouldn't make a humble wife for a preaching man.

Amor felt the stealthy flow of color that crept over his skin, and he turned his eyes away from Phoebe. A man didn't have a right to stand in a church pulpit, lettin' his eyes and his thoughts go dreamy. Besides, what would Hesper Johnson say!

A GRIMY seed of humor sprouted in his thoughts. He looked at Hesper's freshly scrubbed face, looking like a sage hen's egg under her grey poke bonnet. To women like Hesper, a minister of the gospel just got up and got married one day, like it was his duty to do, and that was the beginning and the end of it. Folks who suspicioned that preaching men fell in love were talking blasphemy, and invitin' the Lord's vengeance down on their tongues.

Amor bowed his head, but long before the prayer was finished he was conscious of the heavy breathing of the man who had banged open the door, and then stood just inside the church. When the prayer was over, he watched Noah Borchard stump forward on bulldog bowed-legs to one of the rear seats.

Noah Borchard — who seemed mighty high-handed with the Lord's teachings— was finally coming to church.

After that even the songs seemed subdued, and Amor could tell that the women folks' necks were itching to turn around and have a look. When the last hymn was sung they filed out, casting sideways glances, and holding their voices to murmurs.

Amor stood in front of the pulpit while Noah stumped down the aisle. Phoebe was slow getting out of her seat, and the cattleman detained her with a glance.

"Maybe you'll be interested," he said. To Amor he rumbled, "Mighty fine sermon this morning."

Amor accepted Noah's horny hand, and nodded, but remained silent. Noah wasn't the kind to come with compliments without a purpose.

"I been thinkin' that if you was to have a bigger church, the young people might come flockin' in better," Noah said, glancing at Phoebe. "There's a heap of young men that could pay attention to their church-going and keep themselves out of trouble."

Amor looked quietly at Noah's bushed eyebrows, graying and coarse, like twisted clumps of dead grass. Noah had taken more than his share of the riches of the land, and now he was ready to make his peace with the Lord and perhaps gain a little side advantage to the bargain. Church going young men wouldn't be apt to run off Noah's range-fattened horses.

"You mean you want to build a new church for the young folks' benefit?" Amor questioned closely.

Noah puffed and nodded. "Kind of a

monument to the progress of Clover City," he said.

Amor's gaze pencilled a line from Noah's eyebrows, down the curve of his sleekly rounded belly, to the soft leather of the cattleman's boots.

"There's a lot of hungry young men on the range," he said quietly. "Maybe you'd better to put that money for church buildin' into wages and put some of them to work."

"You mean you ain't wantin a new church for Clover City? Noah bridled. "You a preacher and you dont believe in buildin' a house for the Lord?"

Amor looked tiredly around at the rough plank benches, the dust filtered floor and unpainted walls of the frontier church. There was a time for building churches, all in the due course of progress.

'We've got a church," he said slowly, looking again at the dinginess around him. "Most ways it's way ahead of the rest of the civilization on the range."

Standing at the church door, Amor watched Noah hump himself into the saddle of the long-legged bay horse that the cattleman always rode. A thousand dollars, folks said it had cost him, shipped all the way from the East. The bay twitched nervously under the light flick of the reins so that the morning sunlight rippled along the sleekness of its coat, turning the reddish brown hue to a blood red color. Noah Borchard knew and loved good horseflesh, and the thin-legged bay was his best.

After a fashion, Amor knew, the bay stood for all there was to stand for in Wyoming territory. If a man had a horse like that he could ride it proudly, as a sign of his prosperity, and hold that he was above need for preaching. If a man lacked the wherewithall to buy one, he was too busy plotting ways to remedy the situation to spend his time meditating on the Lord's system of distribution.

Noah Borchard rode his high-stepping bay over an entire countryside, sittin' too high, and lookin' too far over the heads of other men to see if their bellies were pinched and their eyes hollow.

When he turned, Amor regarded Phoebe's quietness at his side. He looked down at the toes of the high-lacing shoes.

"Just because you're the preacher ain't standin' proof that you've a right to turn down good church-buildin' money," Phoebe said softly. "Maybe other folks might hold a difference of thought."

"You'd like to go to church in a building Noah Borchard built?" Amor queried.

"We're mighty needful of a new church," Phoebe said wistfully. "A woman's apt to get her clothes dirtied and torn most anytime."

Phoebe paused. "Hesper Johnson's going to be powerful wrathy when she hears you're turning aside church money," she warned.

Amor locked the sagging door of the church, feeling the rusty knob wobble in his hand. Women folk like Hesper and Phoebe would be prideful of a new building, never reasoning out that a fancy stone church rightfully came as a result and an evidence of men's faith in one another —and not because one man felt that he was better than his brothers.

The words of the morning hymn hummed through Amor's mind, and when he closed his eyes he could feel a giant shaking of the earth as though wrathful footsteps vibrated across the Wyoming plains. *Mine eyes have seen the glory—*

Only when he opened his eyes, there was no glory to be seen in the greyness of the swooping dust. A man couldn't rightfully blame the Almighty because men forgot the proper teachings. But if preaching didn't help, then maybe it was time for a man to clamp shut his mouth and gird on the sword of battle.

THE next day when word came in that Noah's horses had been raided again, folks said that Eric Wallace had had a hand in it. Amor knew that mentioning Eric's name had become something of a habit when things went bad, and that there was perhaps more convenience than fact to the charge. Yet he couldn't be positive when he met Noah on the board walk in front of the general store. Noah had lost his bluntness of Sunday morning.

"I been thinkin' over your words, Reverend," Noah allowed. "Maybe if you was to tell young Eric to return my horses, I'd give him and his partners jobs."

Amor studied the cattleman's heavy face for signs of his thoughts.

"I've no way of knowing one way or another that Eric's mixed up in the horse stealing," Amor said. "But I'll give him your message."

Later when he had searched out Eric in the back room of the saloon, the youngster bristled darkly.

"You're all-fired quick with your judgment that I'm guilty," Eric snapped.

Eric had been drinking but he was still in muscular control of his hands and tongue. Amor looked at him quietly. A man didn't need much more than Eric's quick-tempered snarlings to know that he was guilty.

Eric had gone smoky inside, so that it shown in his eyes and in the twistings of his hands. It wasn't hard to see that he hated the thing he was doing, but that he hated hunger too, and hated the prideful way that Noah Borchard flaunted his bay mount in the faces of other horse-loving men.

"I'm not saying you're guilty," Amor said. "I'm giving you Noah's message."

Eric smirked. "If Noah's handing out jobs, I reckon dang near the whole country will be there."

Amor found Eric's promise a prophecy, for by mid-afternoon more than twenty men had congregated in front of the general store. There were youngsters there who had cut new notches in their belts, pulling tattered levis tighter around their midriffs . . . kids who found the rewards of horse thieving better than starvation.

There were other older men too—long-faced range riders that a preacher might pass a lifetime without meetin' unless he frequented the back room of the saloons. The chronic no-goods that inhabit any land. Looking at them casual like—the young and the old—a person was apt to lump them all together, unless he knew men.

Noah rode up and down in front of the group, bunched like a bulldog in the saddle, the bay lifting its feet high and proud. Amor regarded Eric quietly as the youngster lounged against the porch prop of the store.

"Fine a lookin' passel of horse thieves as I ever set eyes on," Noah said testily.

Amor watched the smoky light in Eric's eyes—evidence of the fire that burned across Eric's brain; the fire that would burn as long as he was hungry until finally his innards turned to charcoal and he became an outlaw forever.

"We ain't here to listen to fancy talk," Eric said shortly. "We hear you're lookin' for men to hire."

Noah sat stockily in the saddle, hunched forward contemptuously.

"I ain't seen none of my horses returned," Noah said.

Eric looked around, so that Amor could see the anger in his eyes.

"Maybe we ain't the men who stole them," Eric parried.

"I'm thinkin' you are," Noah said bluntly. "I sent word for the men that stole my horses to come in. I reckon I'm lookin' at the men who got the message."

Amor felt Eric's eyes, swift and hot upon him; then the youngster turned back to face the cattleman.

"Then your offer of jobs was a trick," he said, the words grinding through the air like the grinding of a snag-toothed whip saw through soft wood.

Noah held the bay motionless. Amor looked at the faces around him. Some of the range-hearted oldsters smiled gloatingly, as though they had known this was the way it would be. But in the younger faces, like Eric's, there was sharpened hatred.

Noah nodded. "I got no jobs for horse thieves," he said solidly, "but I wanted to see what you looked like. I wanted to brand your faces inside of me, so I can hunt yah down and drive yah out."

Noah wheeled the bay then, rearing back so that the horse's hoofs churned dust in the faces of the men as he left.

AMOR moved toward Eric, but the youngster turned his back and walked stolidly away. One of the dark-faced riders snickered.

"Better see your preacher friend again, Eric," the rider called. "The next idea of his'n might be better."

Then Amor met Phoebe. Her eyes challenged him reproachfully. Helplessly, he dropped his own gaze.

"It goes to show what happens when a preacher goes meddlin' in the affairs of other men," Phoebe said sharply.

He kept his gaze on the time-whitened veins of the board walk. Phoebe was

wearin' her high-lacing, high-heeled shoes again, even though it was a week day.

He couldn't blame Phoebe for being riled the way she was. Eric's anger ran deep, with the devil flaming inside him, and Phoebe's worry was shadowed in her eyes.

"Maybe you're right," Amor said humbly.

"If you men can't run things proper," Phoebe said grimly, "maybe the women will have to step in and take a hand."

Amor nodded, but didn't answer. It was kind of difficult imagining Phoebe doing things and going places where those high-heeled shoes couldn't follow her. And Hesper would be too busy scrubbing her face and pressing the wrinkles out of her poke bonnet to do more than fuss and fret that man's image didn't turn out the way heaven must have planned it.

In the room of the hotel where he lived, Amor settled tiredly into an armed rocker, his head heavy against the faded threads of the antimacassar.

Noah Borchard had made a promise and then come to the meeting with unclean hands, and a dozen hungry young men who might have come to better days were turning back to the only way of making a living that they knew. Men who could later say, with justice, that they started the journey with a preacher's blessing.

Anger was like a sore wound in Amor's heart. Men like Noah didn't want fairness for all—or even a full belly. They wanted it only for themselves.

He slumped so that his fingers pressed against the smooth upholstery buttons on the sides of the chair seat. A preacher could be the most useless of all the Lord's creatures. Men hired their ministers to do talking of a Sunday morning, when faces were scrubbed and clean, and there was time out to bother with one's conscience. They didn't like to see him wasting his week days with other men's affairs when he should be sittin' and thinkin' of benedictions for the Sabbath, or visitin' with the sick.

Amor closed his eyes. Somehow you got to know people better if you pictured them at the Pearly Gates. Eric would walk straight through them when his time came, proud and defiant, and daring anyone to say that heaven wasn't his rightful place.

Noah Borchard would hang around the outside, waiting to bargain with Saint Peter for a better set of wings to flaunt in the other angel's faces. And Phoebe—Phoebe would go in prim and proper, and certain that she belonged there all the time.

There wasn't much hope for people, so long as they spent all their time thinkin' only of themselves.

DARKNESS had flooded the room, making chunky black blobs of the furniture when Amor heard the scratching at his door. When he had lit the kerosene lamp and opened the door, Eric stepped quickly inside.

"I've come for you," Eric said sharply.

Amor remained silent, waiting.

"We've got Noah Borchard," Eric said huskily. "We got him and his pet bay and we're aimin' to teach him a lesson."

Amor studied the bitterness of Eric's face. The fires of hatred were leaping within him, searing away his conscience.

"We figure maybe you're needin' a lesson too," Eric added.

Amor's shoulders sagged tiredly. Physical violence wouldn't hurt as much as other things—for instance noting the kind of a bulge in Eric's levi pockets that only a gun could make. Eric had always walked clean-hipped toward the future.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon," Amor said, not whining. "Noah gave me his message, and I carried it to you. I figured he was aiming to keep his word."

Eric laughed thickly. "You needn't be frettin' your conscience. We didn't figure he was reformin'. While Noah was pullin' his little trick, we had half our men running another batch of horses off his range."

"You mean you wouldn't have taken jobs if Noah had offered them?" Amor questioned, stunned.

"Why should we work for Borchard?" Eric swaggered. "So long as he stocks fat horses, we can live."

Confusion and then the roaring of anger pounded at Amor's temples. Eric's hands had been no cleaner at the meeting than Noah's. All Noah wanted was to maintain his supremacy on the range. All Eric wanted was to supplant him. Each would make his own rules—and neither would

feel that justice was binding upon him.

Amor looked pityingly on Eric. "After what you've just told me," he said tightly, "any other lessons you have to teach would seem mild."

Amor walked silently past the hotel clerk in the lobby, conscious of Eric's tenseness. A word now, or a signal would be enough, and he wouldn't have to go wherever Eric was taking him, but the momentary anger had left his senses numbed as though his thoughts would vomit from their sickness.

Outside in the soft darkness of the street, Eric turned quizzically. "I didn't think you'd come," Eric said.

Amor walked without speaking. There were no words now to explain the uselessness that a preacher felt. He couldn't rightly hold himself to blame for what had happened, and yet he couldn't feel that he had done anything to prevent it. Sunday morning sermons weren't of much help. Perhaps during this night he could find ways to make Noah and Eric listen.

Eric had tethered horses just outside the town, and a short ride brought them to a shadowy grove. The grove was little more than a mile from town, and Amor wondered at their boldness.

Looking around, though, it was easy to see that Eric had not been boasting when he said only half their numbers had come to town during the afternoon. There were forty or more men haggling in an opening near the center of the grove.

He glanced at Noah Borchard, bound tightly to a moss-creased oak tree, moonlight like cotton gauze across his heavy jowls. Noah's eyes were wary but not fearful. The bay cropped the long grass that edged under bushes nearby.

Amor felt himself grabbed roughly from behind. "Better tie your preacher friend up," a harsh voice said in his ear, aimed across his shoulder at Eric.

He didn't struggle while they tied him along the side of the same tree where Noah was bound. The rope cut tight across the pit of his stomach, producing an ache there that was somehow comforting. His arm grew rigidly numb where the rope shut off the circulation.

"Hangin's too good for Borchard," a long-faced gunman spat bitterly in the center of the clearing. "It wouldn't cut him down where his pride is."

"Hangin' his horse might," a wheezy voice interrupted.

"Hangin's no good for a horse," another objected. "A bullet's quicker."

"Too quick maybe for Noah to have time for thinking," the long-faced rider said, lingering over the words. "I never seen a horse hung—not a thousand dollar filly like Noah's. Seems like an apt idea."

Eric's face was chalky white in the darkness, so that Amor could see the dancing pupils of his eyes. The younger men hung back in indecision, and the long-faced outlaw came off his haunches with sudden briskness.

"Find us a good tree," the outlaw said, smiling evilly at Amor. "This'll give the preacher an idea of the sermons yah find on the back trails."

THE dark-faced oldsters were in charge now as they snaked a heavy rope over the high fork of an oak. When they led the bay forward, Amor saw its quivering sides and its eyes, wide and startled, like a child's.

Then they dropped the noose over the high-flung head of the animal, and the outlaws pulled the noose tighter and tighter as they strained against the rope—like a tug of war with a giant.

The bay's eyes bulged as the noose tightened, gradually pulling its forefeet off the ground. Then the animal screamed wildly, its head threshing against the tautness, rearing back in wildness and fright.

The outlaws quickly took up the gap, so that when the bay tried to lower its legs, it found itself trapped. The horse's mouth fell open gaspingly. Amor's hands grew cold with the stickiness of perspiration. The bay's head strained higher and higher against the rope, as its tongue lolled.

It would end soon now, Amor knew. The outlaws panted sweatingly at the heavy weight of the animal. The strain would snap the animal's neck before the rope would lift its threshing hind legs from the ground.

A wild-eyed youngster threw himself at the sweating men, and Amor heard the crunch of a hard-driven fist. The youngster stumbled back, his face bloodied.

"You flung in your bargains with us,

and now you'll keep them," the long-faced outlaw snarled.

The heaving sides of the bay throbbed with the intensity of its struggle. The rope creaked tautly overhead as it sawed against the tree. Amor looked at Eric.

"It's your own horse you're killing," Amor said softly.

The sudden rush of blood to Eric's face was like lightning across a moonless sky.

"It ain't my horse," he said chokingly.

"It's your horse, and every man's horse," Amor said quietly. "If one man's horse can be hung, so can another's, and no one will ever feel safe riding the range again."

He looked at Noah, craning his head around the tree to see the cattleman's eyes, but all he could see was the blunt, colorless jowls of Noah's face.

The bay's front legs hung limply now, its head begining to sag against the noose, its huge sides throbbing with pain.

Then Amor saw the quick flashing of the knife in Eric's hand as the youth sprang forward. Eric leaped high, and when the knife slashed through the rope, the men who strained at the end of it went tumbling back.

The bay dropped heavily, like a bloated bag of grain, its legs crumped under it, and Eric fell to his knees and clawed at the severed noose.

The youngsters had moved into a compact circle across from the outlaws, and Amor heard one of the horse-hangers turn aside into the bushes, retching as he vomited. "We're taking back our bargains with you," Eric panted.

Silence weighed upon the groups, faced across the heaving body of the horse, and then the oldsters moved away toward their mounts.

Amor felt the warmth trickle back into his hands after one of the youngsters had severed the ropes that bound him. When he looked at Noah, the old cattleman's face was quivering.

"Like the reverend said, it's your horse now," Noah said thickly.

Eric's head turned in rebellion.

"I ain't askin' for anything that's yourn," he snapped heatedly.

Amor looked at Noah, instinctively aware that the cattleman had intended the offer as a gesture of good will. Noah stood awkwardly facing Eric.

"Maybe you'd like a job then," Noah said.

Amor watched Eric come off his knees. "Another trick?" Eric questioned hotly.

Noah shook his head, looking around at the group.

"Good jobs," he repeated, "with good pay and no questions asked. No favors given, and none borrowed, and your future up to your own making of it."

Eric's tenseness seemed to ease. "It's like I told the preacher," he said softly. "If you're offering jobs, I reckon on dang near the whole country will be there."

It was then that Amor heard the singing, and raised his head in listening. The music was far off, coming closer step by step. Phoebe's voice was above the rest of them, and poor Hesper was off key again.

Mine eyes have seen the glory—

THE music came closer. When the women marched into the grove their knotty pine torches cut a span of light as though redemption day had come.

Amor saw the slow grin that welted Eric's face.

"Heavens to Betsy," Eric snorted. "Sis has got them high-heeled shoes off."

Amor looked at Phoebe. The high-lacing, high-heeled shoes were looped around her neck, her bare toes wiggling in the grass. Hesper's poke bonnet was crushed back off her forehead, as though wrinkles didn't matter.

"Hesper and I come to the hotel to see you," Phoebe said grimly. "The clerk said you'd gone off with Eric. We knew where to come."

Armor wanted to move forward then, to put his arms around Phoebe's shoulders, and show that he was prideful of her behavior, but Hesper was there and wouldn't have allowed that it was proper.

Amor watched the bay horse clamber stiffly to its feet. Some day he and Phoebe would just up and get married, the way folks would say the Lord had willed it. Phoebe's bare toes were flat and wiggly in the moonlight. She'd make a humble wife for a preaching man.

NOOSE BAIT

By H. A. DE ROSSO

The little mining town lay helpless, gripped by a ruthless, unknown terror. Only Dave Feringo, outcast and despised, could lift the spell—if a bullet didn't find his back first!

THERE WAS A SULLEN BITterness about him, apparent in the set of his thin, tight lips. His outthrust jaw carried a surly challenge and an ugly humor boiled in his cold, steel-gray eyes.

He was dressed in soiled, cream-colored buckskins, with a dirty, gray, wide-brimmed stetson pulled low over his eyes, shading but not quite concealing the whiskey-shine that lay in them. The black-handled Navy .44 rode his left hip, butt forward.

He was in his middle twenties, tall and wiry, and he kept hitching his shoulders as though a great restlessness rode them.

This, then, was Dave Feringo . . .

He was standing, this gray, blustery day, in front of the Union Bar in Aspen Gulch, taking his leave of the one man who held no contempt for him—gaunt Ed Erskine. Erskine's clothes flapped about on his thin frame like the rags on a scarecrow and, looking at the man's long, sad, homely face, Feringo thought that those features would look good on an undertaker.

The high-wheeled coach was waiting, the driver impatiently fingering his lines and calling, "You coming, Erskine? I ain't got all day to wait . . ."

Erskine staggered up to the coach, put a hand on the door and turned toward Feringo. "I trust I shall see you soon, David," he said gravely. "When next you pass by Barnes' ranch just drop in

Feringo leaped back and snatched at his Navy .44.

and we'll have a few sociable drinks together. Will you do that, David?"

"Come on, come on," the driver growled. "Get in this damn hack."

A slight, little-used grin touched Dave Feringo's lips. He and Ed Erskine had had quite a few drinks in the Union Bar and Erskine's companionship had eased somewhat that burning bitterness inside Feringo. Erskine was a strange man. He spoke in cultured tones and evidently was well-educated. There was talk that he was a remittance man. He spent most of his time at Nat Barnes' combination ranch and roadhouse and was always drunk. What Erskine did at Barnes' place no one in Aspen Gulch seemed to know or cared.

"I'll do that, Ed," Feringo said. "I'll drop over to Barnes' real soon."

Erskine bowed, almost falling on his face as he did so, but, catching his balance, he pulled himself up into the coach. The driver let out a shrill yip, his whip popped, and the coach went rattling down the pattern of ruts and dirt that served as Aspen Gulch's main street.

FERINGO watched until the coach was out of sight and the sounds of its going had vanished, too. He kept thinking about gaunt Ed Erskine and wondering if he, Feringo, would wind up like that someday. There evidently was something gnawing at Erskine's mind, some old transgression or shame that drove him to lose his real self in drink. And, remembering the cloud that lay darkly about his own integrity, Feringo let a bitter curse slip through his teeth.

He struck across the street with that slow, angry way of his, looking up at the sign that said "Bessey & Co,. Express Line." A scarce two months ago Feringo had been one of Bessey's riders, carrying mail and gold down to Salt Lake City. Then had come the charge that he was looting the mail and gold shipments and that bank account in his name in Salt Lake, and he'd had nothing more than his own word to substantiate his innocence.

He'd been discharged by Emil Bessey and then Feringo had come to know the scorn of every man in Aspen Gulch. Every man except Ed Erskine who passed judgment on no person and was a brother to every one.

He glanced at Bessey's as he passed by and saw that Emil Bessey had stepped outside. Bessey was a heavy-set, thick-jowled man, with shrewd little eyes, forever chewing a cigar. These eyes caught sight of Feringo and lay on him a moment, and Feringo fought down that angry snarl wanting to rise in him for he'd detected a touch of gloating triumph in Bessey's gaze.

Behind Bessey stood the lean, sallow-faced man known as Jack Marshland. They said that Marshland was a road agent, preying on the miners around the Gulch, but there was no proof of the charge.

Marshland, too, was studying Feringo with an insolent twist of the lips and, seeing the two of them standing there, Feringo's hand itched to reach across his body toward the handle of his Navy .44. But that would do no good. What if he did get by Marshland and Bessey? Then he'd be noose bait for the Vigilantes. They had warned him. They had overlooked the looting charge against him but once he used his Navy .44 they'd hang him. They had made it that plain to Feringo.

So he passed the two men with head lowered, savagely kicking a clod of earth out of his way, and he kept on walking thus so that he did not notice her until she spoke.

"Why, Dave," she said, a little petulantly, "aren't you even going to say hello?"

He pulled up sharply, automatically raising his hat, then quickly jerking it low again over his eyes for he was ashamed of the whiskey-shine in them.

"Hello, Jess," he said, thinking that here was the real reason why he had not left the country two months ago and why his shame hurt him so.

Jess Gibson wasn't very big. She had dark brown hair that showed streaks of red gold in the sun and eyes the color of well-cured leather. He thought that he'd never seen her looking any prettier and it pained him more than ever now, knowing that he could never clear his name and make himself worthy of her.

She said, "Will you come down to the

store with me, Dave? I've been looking for you ever since I heard you were back in town. Dad and I want to talk with you . . ."

Frank Gibson owned the general store in Aspen Gulch. He was a big, gruff man, gray at the temples, with a strong, direct way of looking at a man.

Jess did the talking. "There's something crooked about Bessey & Co. Money that is sent out through the mail is almost always short. Take Mike Oldenburg's case as an example. He sent out five hundred dollars to his wife in a letter. But she received only one hundred dollars. But the puzzling part of it is that Oldenburg wrote in his letter that he was sending five hundred dollars but his wife insists that the letter only said one hundred!"

"What does Bessey say?" Feringo asked.

"You know how long it takes for mail to go east and back. Bessey says that in a long time like that a man could be mistaken about the amount he sent."

Feringo smiled crookedly. "Bessey is a smooth talker. He always has an explanation."

"It's happened to me, too, Dave," Jess went on. "You know that many of the miners can't write and so they have me write their letters for them. Yet most of the time their wives or families receive letters stating an amount of money less than I had written."

Dave turned to Frank Gibson. "I tried telling you and the others about Bessey but you believed him over me. I told you every one of his riders was a crook. I was the only honest man he had and when he needed a fall guy he framed me so you and the others would stop complaining about the mail looting.

"On my last ride I stopped at Nat Barnes' ranch for a cup of coffee. Barnes drugged that drink. When I came to I was lying in the trail by the Passamari with my saddlebags gone. I reported the robbery but Barnes denied I'd ever stopped at his place. Then Bessey turns up that fake bank account in Salt Lake in my name. And you and all the others went along with Bessey's charges."

"What else were we to think?" Gibson demanded.

Feringo shrugged bitterly. "I didn't come here to re-hash the thing. You can go on believing it the way you do. It doesn't matter to me any more."

Feringo turned to leave but Jess was after him, pleading, "Please wait, Dave. Please hear me through."

He said over his shoulder, "I want to hear no more of it. Do you think I enjoy talking about it, Jess?"

"It's not that, Dave. Dad is forming his own express line. He wants you to ride for him!"

Feringo pulled up sharply. He turned to Gibson and the man nodded. "We've decided that the only way to beat Bessey is to set up another express line—an honest one. Bessey's charges are too high any way. Two dollars and a half just to carry a letter to Salt Lake. I'll charge just half as much and still make money."

"Does Bessey know this?" Feringo asked.

"Yes. That's what makes it so difficult. Bessey and his toughs have frightened every man I could hire as a rider. There's none that will work for me."

Feringo smiled bitterly. "So that's why you're asking me? Because you can find no one else?"

Gibson said, "That's Jess' idea. She's wanted you from the very first. Here's your chance to prove that her faith in you is justified."

Feringo looked down at Jess, saw the pleading in her eyes. "Please, Dave," she whispered. "This is your chance to get back at Bessey. It's what you want, isn't it? Won't you do it for me, Dave? . . ."

HE KNEW that he should have been suspicious of everything. But in this wild, frontier country there were certain tenets that had to be observed.

Feringo, knowing that Bessey's threats against Gibson's riders were not idle words, was on the alert. Being familiar with every twist and turn of the trail, he carefully avoided every spot that could conceal an ambush. It wasn't only the mail and gold dust in his saddle pouches that he had to get through to Salt Lake. His own honor and integrity were in those pouches.

So, when he first saw the smoke, a faint suspicion stirred him. But this was still

wilderness country with roving bands of Piegans and Blackfeet and Sioux. There had been no Indian trouble for a year but their menace still persisted.

So he rode cautiously and soon the crackle of the flames was in his ears. The burning wagon lay off the trail, tipped over on its side, with no sign of the horses. The scene bore every evidence of an Indian attack. A man lay sprawled beside the wagon, an arrow sticking out of his back.

The man on the ground groaned as Feringo drew near. Dismounting, Feringo went over to the prone form and, looking down, the truth hit him—for there was no blood on the man's back. But it was too late.

Even as Feringo was leaping back and snatching at his Navy .44, the man on the ground reached out, grabbing Feringo's boots, jerking hard, spilling Feringo to the ground. He tried to twist himself as he fell so that he would land on his back with his gun held before him.

But he struck the ground on his right side, grinding his arm against his ribs, and the pain of it caused him to lose his grip on his Navy .44. Then they were on him. Not one man but several, kicking the .44 out of reach of his clawing fingers. A blow caught him alongside his jaw and all the fight went out of him.

Feringo lay there, dazed, comprehending what went on about him, but powerless to move or even open his eyes. Their gloating laughter was harshly faint in his ears.

A voice that sounded like Jack Marshland's was saying "Let him have his gun. We want him to. And are you sure his face isn't marked? We want no sign of violence on him. Have you got the pouches? Let's ride then. Seems a shame to pull a trick like this on Feringo twice but he's such an easy mark . . ."

THAT'S all there was. After a while the paralysis wore off and Feringo sat up, shook the fuzz out of his mind and looked about him. His pony still stood there with trailing reins and on the ground not far from him was Feringo's black-handled Navy .44.

It was all very clear to Feringo as he rose shakily to his feet. Bessey didn't want it to look like robbery. He wanted it to appear as if Feringo had looted another express shipment. There was nothing that would destroy confidence in Frank Gibson's new express line than the knowledge that he had employed a rider of dubious integrity.

For a while Feringo didn't quite know what to do. A roiling disgust filled him at first, turning then to a savage anger. He knew that his story of having been robbed again wouldn't stand up. If he went back to Aspen Gulch and reported the truth, all that would gain him would be a Vigilante noose around his neck.

The only sensible thing to do would be to get on his pony and hit it out of the country. But something held him back. The memory of a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl and her faith in him. If he ran away now, thus cinching his guilt, what else could she believe of him?

There must be something he could do. There just had to be . . .

He recalled that he wasn't far from Nat Barnes' roadhouse and along with that came remembrance of Ed Erskine. A dry grin pulled at Feringo's lips. Erskine would be ideal company for him. Together they could get drunk and perhaps ease the weight that lay so heavily on both their minds.

Thinking thus, the whole pattern suddenly fitted into Feringo's mind. It lay there now crystal-clear, so obviously simple that he wondered it should have taken him so long to comprehend it.

An overwhelming eagerness rushed through him and, setting spurs to the pony's flanks, Dave set him at a gallop toward Barnes' ranch . . .

Nat Barnes was a bear of a man with shaggy, uncombed hair and dirty black whiskers. His eyes were red-rimmed and never still, carrying a truculent insolence in their restlessness.

Erskine, on the other hand, was overjoyed to see Feringo. His long, sad face cracked into a rare smile. "It's so good to see you again, David," he said. "This place gets me down."

"If you don't like it here, why do you stay?" Feringo asked.

Barnes slammed a bottle loudly down on the bar in front of them. "What'll it be, Feringo?"

And so it began . . . When it was well into the night, Erskine had mellowed and grown sad. A haunted glimmer began to mingle with the liquor-glaze in his eyes. Feringo noticed and reckoned that the time was about right. He had been drinking, too, but sparingly, and he knew that Barnes was aware of the fact.

Erskine was tracing wet circles on the bar with his glass. "I wonder," he said musingly, "why a man has to get drunk before he can see all of the mistakes he has made in his life?"

"What have you ever done that could have been a mistake?" Feringo asked. "I don't believe you ever did a wrong thing in your life."

Erskine began to laugh. "You don't believe I've ever done a wrong thing? Why, look at me. I was a man once. I had a great future. There was great talent in these fingers of mine. But now that talent is a perverted thing, given to satisfying—"

Barnes broke in sharply, "What you drinking, Erskine? The house is buying this one."

Erskine said, "Eh?" His head lifted, owlishly studying Barnes. "Oh, drink? Why, the usual, Nat, the usual. Do I ever drink anything else?"

Barnes filled the glasses. "Drink up, gents, and then let's hit the hay. It's kind of late."

"I'm not at all tired, Barnes," Feringo said. "I think I'll stay here and chat with Ed a while longer."

Erskine shook his head. "Don't want to go to sleep. I might dream—dream of all that I've done. I want to stay here and drink and talk and forget."

"You better shut that damn trap of yours, Erskine," Barnes said. "Somebody might not like to have you talking too much."

"Somebody?" Feringo asked sharply. "Who, Barnes?"

Barnes' laugh was ugly. "Wouldn't you like to know?" He moved around the bar and took Erskine's arm. "Come on, I'm putting you to bed. You've had enough for tonight."

He began to drag Erskine across the room. Feringo put a hand on Barnes' shoulder. "Leave him be, Barnes," Feringo snapped.

With a snarl, Barnes released Erskine, the gaunt man falling to his hands and knees on the floor. "I've taken enough from you!" Barnes cried, reaching into a vest pocket.

His fingers flashed out with a derringer, but Dave had been prepared. His Navy .44 was in his right hand and he laid the long barrel against Barne's head. The man fell limp. . . .

DAVE FERINGO rode back into Aspen Gulch, slowly and nonchalantly, down the rutted main street so that word of his return would have time to be passed around.

Emil Bessey came hurrying out of his office to watch and so did Jack Marshland. Feringo raised a hand in salute to them and flashed a white, derisive smile. It pleased him that Bessey and Marshland exchanged questioning looks.

In front of Gibson's store Feringo reined in his pony. He sat his saddle, waiting, while the crowd began to form.

Frank Gibson came out of the store and Jess, too. He saw the white, strained look on her face and so he smiled reassuringly at her and when she saw that the color began to come back to her cheeks.

Gibson's eyes were direct and hard and under their scrutiny Feringo's smile died. "You came back?" Gibson asked.

Feringo looked over the crowd. There was a good number of miners present and several of Emil Bessey's toughs. Bessey and Marshland had come forward, standing beside Gibson to stare up at Feringo.

Feringo said to Gibson, "Why, didn't you expect me back?"

Gibson said, "There have been some ugly rumors going around. Rumors that you had never gone to Salt Lake City. That you had run off with the express shipment and that if you did return to the Gulch, that you'd say you had been held up."

Feringo, looking now at Bessey and Marshland, smiled crookedly. "I wonder who could have started a rumor like that."

Gibson said sharply, "Well, Feringo. *Have* you been to Salt Lake?"

Feringo looked over the crowd, something cold catching in his throat as he began to hear the first low rumble of their anger.

"Of course, I've been there," he said clearly, looking Frank Gibson in the eye. "And I never was robbed!"

Bessey glanced questioningly at Marshland who had begun to scowl. Bessey worked his cigar around to the edge of his mouth.

"Prove it," Bessey barked. "Prove that you were in Salt Lake and delivered your express pouches, Feringo."

"Certainly," Feringo said. He handed a slip of paper down to Gibson. "I had a hunch someone was going to try to frame me again so I played it safe this time. I had a receipt made for every item I carried in my pouches and there it is, signed by the banker and postmaster in Salt Lake City. Go ahead, Bessey. Look it over."

Out of the corner of his eye, Feringo could see that Jess was smiling and dabbing at her eyes, but that was all the attention he could divert to her. There was a more pressing peril now.

The coldness and hostility had gone out of Frank Gibson. He was smiling. "Well, this should be proof enough," he said.

Feringo figured that now was the time to fire his last bolt. He shifted in the saddle so that his holster hung free and said, "By the way, Frank, I *was* held up on the way. But I had been expecting that so I hid the real letters and gold dust under the skirts of my saddle. The pouches the robbers got was a dummy!"

Emil Bessey had been engrossed in reading the receipt. At Feringo's last words, Bessey's head shot up sharply. His face purpling, he looked at Jack Marshland.

Marshland said without thinking, "But it wasn't a dummy. It was the real—"

He realized his error and abruptly stopped but Gibson spoke up sharply, "What was that you said, Marshland?"

Feringo was waving another slip of paper with his left hand and shouting, "I've got the rest of the proof here. A confession I got out of Nat Barnes, how Bessey's riders stop at Barnes' ranch where the letters are opened, money removed, and then Ed Erskine re-copies the letters in the writer's hand, and they are sealed again. There's—"

But he didn't have time for more. Bessey and Marshland had begun backing away and as they moved the temper of the mob rose, bursting into a roar.

"Damn you, Feringo," Bessey shouted. "You'll never live to gloat over this."

His hand swept out from under his coat and Jack Marshland was drawing, too. Feringo's hand flashed across his stomach and back, carrying his Navy .44. Flattening himself along his pony's neck, he fired. Bessey shuddered under the impact of the bullet, turned and bumped into a rain barrel. He paused there a moment, and then suddenly folded like a jackknife, his face falling into the water but he was not aware of that or anything else any more.

Marshland's weapon was out and roaring. An angry sear blazed its way across Feringo's back. He laid down two fast shots and Jack Marshland stood there, clawing at the blood pouring out of his throat, and then he, too, was flat on the ground. . . .

THE CROWD had overcome the rest of Bessey's men and these were so terrified at the prospect of Vigilante nooses that they readily corroborated Feringo's charges against Bessey & Co.

Jess was all for caring for the gash across Feringo's back but he, knowing the temper of these miners, had a little more to say.

"Don't go too hard on Ed Erskine, men," Feringo called. "Without his help I never would have got the goods on Bessey. You see, I really *was* robbed of my pouches and it was Ed Erskine who forged that receipt for me and also Nat Barnes' confession. Erskine is an old, broken man. Let's take him in and give him a decent home. I'll be responsible for his conduct in the future. What do you say, men?"

The crowd's ear-shattering roar brought a grin to Dave Feringo's face and he knew that it would sound even better to Ed Erskine. He shifted in the saddle and sudden pain racked his back. He looked down at Jess Gibson and thought how nice it would be having her care for him.

So he dismounted and put his arm around her, leaning his shoulder against hers, not that he needed the support but why not make the best of a good thing?

the COLORADO!
BY WALTER GALLI
1,145 MILES LONG, THE WILD AND BEAUTIFUL COLORADO IS THE FIFTH LONGEST RIVER IN THE UNITED STATES...

NO HISTORY OF THE WEST CAN BE COMPLETE WITHOUT DEVOTING A CHAPTER TO THE GREAT **COLORADO** RIVER. **FRANCISCO DE ULLOA** DISCOVERED THE MOUTH OF THE MIGHTY, TURBULENT STREAM (AT THE HEAD OF THE GULF OF CALIFORNIA) IN 1539...THE FOLLOWING YEAR, **CORONADO'S** HARDY ADVENTURERS, MOUNTED ON HORSEBACK, FOLLOWED THE RIVER TO THE SOUTH RIM OF THE VIOLENTLY BEAUTIFUL GRAND CANYON...THAT SAME YEAR, ONE **HERNANDO DE ALCARON** DARINGLY ASCENDED THE RIVER **234** MILES TO A POINT ABOVE YUMA, ARIZONA...MELCHIOR DIAZ, CORONADO'S MESSENGER TO ALCARON, CALLED THE COLORADO, **"FIREBRAND** RIVER;" **AFTER** THE NAKED YUMA INDIANS, WHO IN COLD WEATHER CARRIED FIREBRANDS FOR WARMTH... **MUCH** LATER--LIEUT. ZEBULON M. PIKE (1806-1807), THE FOUNDER OF PIKE'S PEAK, AND **JEBEDIAH STRONG SMITH** (1826-1827) WERE AWED, AS WERE THEIR PREDECESSORS, AT THE **COLORADO'S** ILLIMITABLE STRENGTH.... THE **RIVER** HAS SEEN A CAVALCADE OF EXPLORERS, ADVENTURERS, TRAPPERS AND FRENZIED GOLD SEEKERS--ONE OF THE MORE LURID TALES CONCERNS THE **LOST DUTCHMAN MINE**...SOME **35** MILES FROM PHOENIX, ARIZ., ONE JACOB WALZ KILLED **3** MEN TO GAIN POSSESSION OF A RICH GOLD MINE--AND **8** MORE TO KEEP. **THE MINE ITSELF HAS NEVER BEEN FOUND AFTER WALZ DIED.**

THE DEVIL IS A PILGRIM

By DON HOLM

THE SUN WAS STRAIGHT overhead, blistering down upon the few living things forsaken by nature when she abandoned that desolate region of lava flats and dry ravines to the devil—and to man.

He came stumbling along a dry stream bed, a young, well-built man, naked down to his sunburned skin, urging himself to the effort of motion. His eyes no longer guided him; the endless parched lava wavered through the invisible heat waves like the horizon on a rough sea. He blundered into a sage bush and fell flat on his face in the hot sand. He lay there resting for a time, mumbling to himself without moving his cracked lips.

"The furs, George . . . gotta keep goin'...gotta get...Pierre's Hole..."

He did not even have shoes on his feet. The Arapahoes had taken them. They had stripped him and George, and with a savage delight had turned them loose to wander through the lava land. George did not mind now. He was dead. His body lay in a ravine three days' journey to the south, the buzzards picking at his shriveled flesh.

He who had survived was too weak himself now to dig for roots or catch mice. His throat was so dry he couldn't swallow anyway.

He raised himself to one knee, his head dangling limply, while he rested again. He got to his feet unsteadily, leaning forward to force himself into motion.

He weaved around a series of shallow craters, and across another dry stream

Desperately, he threw himself in the saddle . . .

Young Aaron Fitzgerald slogged grimly on. A fortune awaited him at a wilderness rendezvous and nothing would stop him—neither ravening hunger nor whistling lead—no, not even the tempting charms of a wagon-train queen!

bed, where two deep parallel ruts in the hard lava barred his way. His foot caught in the first one and he fell forward again on his face. His chest lay across the other one. The ruts were deep. One hand explored the obstacle, then suddenly his head jerked up. He sat up with an effort, panting heavily.

There were several ruts like the one he had stumbled over. There was sign of human beings also, albeit it was tragic sign. As far as he could see the ruts in the lava were bordered by the jetsam of a thousand caravans. There were broken wheels, remnants of wagon boxes, abandoned Red River carts — tables, stoves, chairs, once-cherished heirlooms, and furniture of all description. The whitened bones of countless animals littered the wayside in an almost continuous pile.

The rankness of recent death was in the air. He saw the bodies of an oxen and several mules nearby. The flesh still clung to their frames. A single dun-colored horse, weakened into immobility, stood by the side of the road, looking to the newcomer for help. Its pathetic cries were almost inaudible. Its body was like a hide hung on a picket fence.

The Oregon Trail! The realization sparked his desperate hope, as the human facility of reasoning became stronger.

He took inventory of the scattered debris of cast-offs as he sat on the ground between the wagon ruts, conserving his remaining strength. Apparently the last wagon train had passed here recently. It might be days or weeks before another.

He might kill the horse for food—if he could find a weapon to accomplish it.

He crawled to an abandoned wagon which had been left near the road. Its front wheels had been removed and the front end of the wagon rested on the axle, much like an oxen on its knees. The canvas cover was rotted and rent with holes. The man pulled himself over the tongue and up into the front of the box. He rested briefly inside, and then fell to searching the refuse that had been hurriedly scattered by the panicked emigrants. He uncovered a navy revolver in good condition, but it was empty. There was also a Spencer carbine under the pile, likewise unloaded. He dug feverishly in hopes of finding ammunition, sobbing in despair as he searched in vain, and finally fell back weakly. Cast-off clothing was in abundance, homespuns and fringed buckskins, and even several boots of different sizes. But there was no ammunition.

A small wooden box was within reach. He pulled it to him, and was aware from its heaviness there was something in it. He found a rusted table knife and pried the crate apart. A sob of joy escaped him as he removed the oilskin-wrapped contents. A box of emergency trail rations which had been overlooked in haste by the emigrants, containing a small quantity of coffee, salt, flour and loaf sugar. He fell upon the sugar with trembling hands and tried to suck on it, but he could not swallow its sticky sweetness. In desperation he crawled out of the wagon.

THE HORSE watched him, pathetically unable to move, while the man rested in the scant shade of the Conestoga. The sun had lost some of its heat, or perhaps he was getting chills from the effect of the sun, he wasn't sure. The shadows had lengthened and the sun was a red ball of fire now instead of a blinding white-hot torch.

Something moved near the horse. The man heard a whirr-r of feathered wings. Three or four shadows swept noisily across his field of vision, a covey of dumpy little sage hens, impelled into their lumbering flight by either fright or urge. The man watched the birds with faint fascination. They leveled off at head height and after a moment they set their wings and started a long slow glide, which carried them out of sight in the distance.

The man's eyes remained glued to the spot where the birds had disappeared. He moved forward weakly, stumbling across the wagon ruts, slowly at first, then blundering ahead with grim intent as his hopes grew.

Some time later, he came upon the birds, gathered around a shallow sink. The sage hens eyed this strange creature approaching them without fear, merely hopping a little to one side as he came closer. At the bottom of the sink was a small pool of gray water, about the size of a dishpan, seepage probably from a subterranean stream. The man broke into a frantic run, throwing his arms forward as he fell face downward in the water.

The water was slightly alkaline, but it was like the cool morning dew to him. He forced himself to drink a small amount at a time. He cupped his hands and let the precious life-giving fluid trickle down on his head.

Then he went back to the wagon to find a container in which to carry water. The sage hens hopped back to the water hole as soon as he had vacated it. He could have killed one of them easily with a rock, but that could wait. He wasn't hungry. The pain of starvation had long since left him. What mattered only was water.

Back on the Trail he found a battered tin pail among the debris. With this he could carry water and store it. He noticed that the horse was down on its knees. When he approached the animal's nose quivered piteously.

"Poor bugger," the man muttered to himself. "It'd take two of you to make a shadow."

He tried to get the dun on its feet, but the horse could not make it. He went back to the waterhole, filled the pail, and returned to the horse. He let the animal drink sparingly of the cooling liquid, then went in search of roots for it to eat. The horse was too weak yet to eat the dry, tasteless stuff. so he piled it on the ground beside the animal.

Dizziness was becoming recurrent, and he knew he must get some food inside himself. He remembered the sage hens, and, gathering a handful of rocks, he started for the waterhole again.

WITH the dawn, the coolness of the night began to dissipate. The rapidly rising sun burned the eastern horizon to the color of hot coals. All the vast waste was revealed in a purplish-gray of the sage against a background of pastel-tinted badlands.

As the sun was moving skyward, a small cloud of dust began to appear on the southeastern rim of the lava beds, fluffing out slowly with increasing density that marked another wagon train on the great trek to the moist, timbered lands of the great Northwest.

On the seat of the leading wagon, protected to a degree from the choking clouds of dust that trailed the wagons, sat a somewhat buxom blonde girl, her face sunburned and peeling, trying to shield herself from the hot rays with a faded parasol. Other women too had come up to the leading wagon to ride to escape the dust.

Behind the train lay the well-beaten trail from the North Platte and the Sweetwater, over the broad meadows of South Pass, across the Sublette Cut-off, and the willow-bordered Green River, and into the sage land and lava beds of the Snake.

The emigrant caravan grew closer and closer as the morning wore away, creeping slowly along at a dusty two miles an hour, avoiding the deep ruts of years of predecessors.

The dun horse raised its head suddenly and flicked its ears toward the approaching sound. Then it got to its feet and whinnied, but did not leave the shade of the wagon, where its new-found master lay sleeping on an alkaline-streaked mattress, salvaged from the wayside.

The captain of the wagon train shouted, and held up his hand. The bull-whackers ceased cracking their whips; the "gees" and "haws" changed to "whoa-gee"—and the wheels stopped turning.

II

THE MAN HEARD THE DUN'S warning in a state of semi-sleep. He had been slowly awakening for hours, as the heat of the morning disturbed his steady slumbering breath.

He had been dreaming of George Baden, down in Utah. He had witnessed again the golden spike ceremony at Promontory Point, at the completion of the Union Pacific. In a saloon afterwards he had listened to old George's wild tales over a bottle of forty-rod, restless for further adventure now that General Dodge had turned the rails over to the maintenance crews. He had been awed by the rough map George sketched in the dirt floor; a map showing the location of a cache, near the old fur rendezvous at Pierre's Hole, on the headwaters of the Snake.

How could he doubt old George? He was the best mountain man in the West. Hadn't he shown the General a way over the Rockies that even the buffalo didn't know about? He, Aaron Fitzpatrick, was proud that the old man thought enough of him to go pards. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars in fur hidden up there in Blackfoot country, waiting for them to come and get it.

Then came the easy trip over the salt flats up out of the Great Salt Basin, over the mountains, into the endless plains. Nearing the region of the vast, lifeless lava beds, they had encountered that thieving band of Arapahoes. There hadn't been much of a fight. The Indians had the drop on them from the start. Not one of the Indians had been killed in the fight that followed. Perhaps that is why he and George had been spared their lives—as if it were a better fate than death in that trackless hell! He remembered watching hopelessly from a distance while the Indians made off with their horses, pack animals and all their belongings.

Fitzpatrick sat up suddenly, fully conscious, gasping a little as his lungs rebelled momentarily against the hotter strata of air. A group of people was gathered in a semi-circle about him, staring. At first he thought he must still be dreaming.

The group within his immediate vision included three or four men and a young woman. The men were all dressed in rough homespuns and buckskin, but the girl had shed her heavy clothing in favor of a gingham house dress. The dress had been altered and the shortened hem stopped just below her knees, following the more practical frontier custom, which would have stunned Eastern social circles.

Fitzpatrick recovered from his surprise

quickly, grinning at the blond girl in a boyish, intimate way. The elderly man was first to speak.

"Who are you, young feller?"

"Name's Aaron Fitzpatrick," he replied. The girls frank interest pleased him. A marriageable girl, he told himself, cataloging her on his score sheet of future possibilities. Though she stared at him as if she were measuring him, there was anything but calculation on her face.

"How long ago did the Bonney party pass by here?" the elderly man asked. "They must of had a heap of trouble, judging from appearances. How come you to get left behind?"

"Huh?" He thought fast. He had no desire to reveal his real reasons for being in this part of the country. "Several days ago, I reckon. I kinda lost track of the time. Had a lot of trouble all right. I was out scouting for water, when somehow I got lost from the train. The folks must of got panicky and lit out at night. When I got back to the trail and couldn't find them, I decided I'd better wait until the next party come along. My horse was too fagged to catch up with the Bonney's." This sounded flimsy, he thought, but it was the best he could think of on short notice. He could tell them about his encounter with the Arapahoes, but that would involve too many questions and endless explanations.

The elderly man shook his head sadly. "I figgered something like this would happen when they decided to take the short cut around Soda Springs. They only saved thirty miles and it's two hundred without water to Fort Hall."

"You say you were scouting for water?" asked the rugged-looking man. He stood close to the blond girl, dominating her presence. "You didn't happen to find any in *this* desert?" His thick eyebrows were raised suspiciously.

Fitzpatrick felt the clash of conflicting purposes. He knew the man did not believe his story, but he had a feeling there was something deeper behind it. "As a matter of fact," he replied, "I did find a seepage. Water's brackish, but it's water."

"Now that's a stroke of good fortune!" the elderly man exclaimed. "Our own barrels are so dry the seams are opening."

Introductions were made perfunctorily. It turned out that the captain of the emigrant part was Ezra Prentiss, the blond girl was his daughter Eliza and her rugged-looking companion was Jason Wyeth. Wyeth was a freighter and, in addition to his freight wagons that were part of the train, he was lieutenant of one of the two sections of the party.

Also there was John Prentiss, brother of Eliza. John was a young man about his own age, but with features more immature, and a measure of studied restraint about his actions bordered on surliness. Fitzpatrick noticed this particularly when young Prentiss came in contact with his father.

Ezra Prentiss turned to the others. "Jason, you go get your section started. We'll detour around to the water, but keep the animals away until we've filled some barrels...Johnny, get a move on and help Eliza with the wagon...You can join up with us if you like, Fitzpatrick. Jason'll find a place for you in his section."

"Sure," Wyeth said. "I can use a man in the cow column."

Fitzpatrick bristled, but said nothing. Wyeth had a subtle, antagonistic manner of speaking, perhaps without realizing it himself. He studied the stocky man. Wyeth had a trick of keeping his face pleasantly expressioned, no matter what he was thinking.

He followed Wyeth to the cavvy and picked out a frisky black to ride. It would be several days at least before the dun would be fit to mount.

After cutting out the horse he turned to find Wyeth regarding him thoughtfully.

"I can't get over the feeling I've seen you before," the freighter said. "It couldn't have been on the U.P., now, could it?"

"It could be," agreed Fitzpatrick pleasantly. "I was with General Dodge."

FITZPATRICK carried out his duties in the cow column without complaining, falling in with the general routine of the wagon train. No one seemed to question his story of losing the Bonney party, for which he was thankful, although Wyeth dropped an occasional vague inquiry that was easily evaded. He began to wish, though, that he'd told them the truth from the beginning. If he did make a slip now, it would make a liar out of him and arouse suspicion.

The Prentiss girl interested him. Her attractiveness seemed to increase every time he saw her. She was the kind of a girl that grew on a fellow, pretty even in trail clothes, and not sparrow-thin like a lot of girls he'd known. She wasn't plump either, but full-bosomed and carried her well-rounded hips handsomely. He had tried to talk to her several times, but it was difficult to find her when Wyeth wasn't close by, occupying her attention.

Two days from Fort Hall, one of the wagons got loose on a downgrade and disaster was barely averted when the driver turned sharply and brought the wagon to a stop against a boulder. Two of the wheels were broken, however, and the train was held up.

Many of the other wagons had loose tires on their wheels, caused by the intense heat drying out the wood and expanding the iron rims. Because it was already late afternoon, Ezra Prentiss decided to camp for the night and make what repairs were necessary until they could reach Fort Hall and a blacksmith shop. Preparations were made for the night. The wagons were drawn in a circle to corral the animals during the hours of darkness, and the women built fires for cooking.

AARON encountered Eliza Prentiss preparing buffalo steaks for the evening meal.

"Hello, Aaron," she greeted.

"Howdy, Miss Prentiss. You alone?"

"Yes. Father and some of the men are fixing the wheels. Why?"

"Oh nothing. I was just wondering where I could find Wyeth."

Eliza pursed her lips thoughtfully. "He's with father." Her eyes twinkled a little. Fitzpatrick wondered if she were reading his mind.

"It can wait. I thought perhaps he'd be with you...He generally is."

"Why, Mr. Fitzpatrick," she demurred, "you sound resentful!"

"Not me, ma'am. It's no skin off my nose. I reckon I got two or three gals back in the States fair waiting for the sight of me."

Her laughter was whimsical. "Now you're bragging, Aaron. I hope that won't keep you from coming to our party tonight. We were counting on you joining the fun."

"Well, I'll thank you for the invitation, ma'am, but I'd hate to cut Wyeth out."

"Oh?" She made a point of raising her brows. "It couldn't be that you're afraid—?"

Before Aaron could answer, John Prentiss came up, listlessly bearing a sledge and blacksmith's tongs. He looked unhappy, but when he saw Fitzpatrick he brightened.

"Howdy, Aaron. Coming to the party tonight?" He winked at his sister.

"Reckon I might show up and give the womenfolks a treat, Johnny."

The heavy voice of Ezra Prentiss broke in on their conversation. His heavy voice sounded irritable.

"Johnny!" he yelled, sticking his head around a corner of the wagon, "Git along here with them tools, boy. We got work to do."

Johnny's eyes flashed rebelliously. He murmured a retort so low Aaron couldn't make it out. Then he added, "Come along, Aaron. You can help us fix those wheels. Here, take some of these damn tools."

They joined the group of men working on the wagon wheels. The men had half a dozen wheels lying on the ground, wrapping wire around the rims, and driving nails into the wood to hold the tires on. A look of disgust crept over Fitzpatrick's lean, sunburned features. He walked over to where Prentiss and Wyeth were working.

"Now ain't this just like a bunch of sod-farmers! You don't expect them tires to last to Fort Hall, do you?"

Wyeth looked up and wiped the sweat off his face with a sleeve. His look contained a large measure of contempt. "Bailing wire and nails hold better than talk, friend."

Prentiss sighed wearily. "Our own blacksmith died of the cholera, coming over the mountains." He stared at the ground, a lost look with black borders of melancholia. "My wife—all the others—reckon it's been a hard trip in every way."

"Maybe I can help, Mr. Prentiss. I was apprenticed to a blacksmith before the war, back in Illinois."

"You seem to have done a lot of things, Fitzpatrick," said Wyeth.

"Ain't I though," retorted Aaron. "You folks lend me a hand. I'll show you how this should be done."

HE SET some of the men to building a huge fire, and directed the others to remove the iron rims from the wheels. Johnny Prentiss, who had been loafing near the wagons, bored by the menial chores assigned him, grinned and pitched in without being asked.

Aaron carefully marked the rims before they were removed, then placed them in the fire in such a way that they would heat evenly. He showed the men how to bank the fire to direct the heat where it would do the most good. Working with hurried efficiency, he trimmed the wheels and prepared them to receive the tires. The other emigrants gathered around to watch the proceedings, including Eliza Prentiss.

Watching the tires in the fire closely, he judged their temperature by the color of the metal. When a tire reached the right degree of cherry red he removed it quickly, slipped it over a wheel, and deftly set it with sledge, tongs and bar. There was no water available for quenching, but he solved this by burying the wheel in dirt. As it cooled the metal rim clinched to the wheel securely.

Wyeth seemed unimpressed, but Ezra Prentiss said, "My boy, that's about the prettiest job of setting tires I've seen. We can use a man like you in this outfit."

Eliza was close enough to hear and Fitzpatrick felt strangely elated. "Nothing fancy," he said lightly. "If we'd had water to spare I could've done a better job of quenching, but I reckon they'll last 'til we get to Fort Hall."

"By the way, son," said Prentiss, "I don't believe you've told us what your plans for the future were. If you're interested, we could use a good smithy out there on the Columbia. I'll be needing you to make repairs on my tramway around the rapids, and there's plenty of work in the settlement. Why, just the business you'd get from the river boats would keep you humping. Jason, here, thinks the railroad will be coming through there soon. He's been badgering me for months to sell—"

"Well, thanks for your offer, Mr. Prentiss," Aaron broke in hastily. "I haven't really made up my mind yet. I'll let you know before we leave Fort Hall."

He hadn't given much thought to a method of carrying out his plan to get the fur, since being rescued by the Prentiss party. He would have to think of something soon, before they reached Fort Hall. The Bonney party might be resting there yet and these people would be sure to learn the truth about him. There were troops at the fort and they might ask questions. Not that he'd done anything criminal, but his actions would look suspicious without a convincing explanation. No, once he found the cache and had the furs safely in his possession, they could ask him all the questions they wanted.

He wished there was someone he could trust. It was going to be difficult to accomplish it alone. In the first place, he had neither an outfit nor pack animals. He had no money and no means to raise an outfit by himself in time. Unconsciously he had been watching the Prentiss family as they returned to their wagon for supper. He stared thoughtfully at Johnny's retreating back.

Johnny was a good kid, full of restless blood, bored by the humdrum routine of everyday life, rebellious of parental restraint. He was straining at the traces to get out on his own and lead a more adventurous life. The boy had cottoned to him from the first, too. It was something to think about.

Jason Wyeth interrupted his thoughts. The freighter was still standing there, eyeing Fitzpatrick. "Eliza tells me you have been looking for me?"

Aaron regarded the stocky man for a moment. Here was a man who had horses to spare. "As a matter of fact I did, Wyeth. I wanted to talk over a proposition with you."

Wyeth smiled disarmingly. "Now that is a right smart coincidence, friend. You see, I have a proposition for you, too. Suppose we get together during the party tonight?"

III

BY THE TIME THE EVENING chores had been settled it was dark, and the night watches had already taken up their posts. Huge fires had been built on the prairie where the emigrants had gathered for the party. Most of them came early. A fiddle and squeezebox were produced, and the first squeaking noise of the instruments brought the rest of the people

on the run. There was much laughing and talking. A general excited expectation hung over the party. The women had dug their dust-cloaked finery from the bottom of trunks, and had made a determined effort to pretty themselves.

Watching from the sidelines, Aaron couldn't help but notice and admire the driving spirit that urged these pioneers over the long, sad trails to the Northwest.

Aaron himself had spruced up. His homespuns were clean and he had slicked up his knotty black hair, trimming the ragged ends around each ear. The music drowned out the voices as the musicians swung into a square dance. The dancers formed their circles, and Ezra Prentiss climbed on a wagon box to do the calling.

Swing your pardner, form a ring,
Figure eight and double L swing.

Fitzpatrick unconsciously tapped his foot, and soon his hands were keeping time with the music.

How'll you swap, how'll you trade,
This pretty gal, for that old maid?

"Are you enjoying the party, Aaron?"

HE whirled around. Eliza stood behind him, smiling. She looked even prettier than before, with her soft blond hair braided over her shoulders, and decked out like a picture in her rustling crinoline.

"Golly, you're pretty!" his compliment was entirely involuntary.

"As pretty as your sweethearts back in the States?"

"Well, now, ma'am, that's an arbitrary statement."

"Are you always so careful not to commit yourself?"

There she was, measuring him again, in that particular way of hers, as if she was examining prospective husbands. She laughed at his sudden awkwardness. "As a matter of fact, there's been several gals thought they had the yoke on me, ma'am. I recollect a saucy little vixen in St. Joe—"

"There you go, Aaron, bragging again!"

Fitzpatrick blushed in spite of himself. He was a little angry. Eliza caught his arm and pulled him toward the dancers.

"Come and dance with me—if you aren't afraid."

He followed her, still feeling that she had command of the situation. By the time they had finished a square dance and joined hands for the Virginia Reel, he had forgotten it and was enjoying himself.

As soon as the opportunity presented itself, he grabbed her around the waist and whirled her out of the ring of dancers, away from the firelight, stopping between two wagons.

Eliza, out of breath and not too surprised at his impulsiveness, laughed. "Why, Aaron, you simply sweep a poor girl right off her feet!" She brought her hand to her throat in a mock gesture. Her fingers accidentally caught in the chain of a small, heart-shaped locket. The chain broke and the locket fell to the ground.

"Oh, Aaron, my locket!"

He dropped to his knees and groped for the trinket. He found it undamaged except for the delicate chain. Before returning it he struck a match and opened the locket. In it was a hand-painted miniature of the girl.

"My mother used to carry that picture of me," she said.

"Back in Illinois, the gals used to give lockets like this to their best beaus."

"Yes, I know."

"I take it you haven't a best beau?"

She didn't answer, but he could see her smiling in the dim reflected firelight. Aaron was aware of a warm weakness taking possession of him. The girl was very close to him; he felt her vibrant presence. This is a marriage-trap, he thought—better be careful. His arms went around her, hesitantly, unsure of himself, but her body yielded easily to his, her head tilted up, and her lips came close. Her mouth was soft and warm when he kissed her; his nerves tingled thrillingly. She pressed herself to him.

The moment was over too soon, and the girl stood away from him. "I've got you figured out," she said. "Those bragging stories about your girls—you just make them up to hide your shyness."

"Huh! I reckon not! I recollect that little Spanish gal in Santa Fe, she gave me a locket once—"

"In that case, Mr. Fitzpatrick—!" She grabbed the locket out of his hand and

dropped it into the bosom of her dress.

Aaron felt foolish suddenly. He had a vague feeling that he'd put his foot into his big mouth and couldn't get it out, without backpedaling. To hell with it! Next thing, he'd be thinking of marriage.

He heard a step close by, and turned to see Wyeth approaching. Eliza saw him, too, and stopped whatever she was going to say.

"Oh, there you are, Fitzpatrick. Howdy, Eliza," said Wyeth.

It was too dark to see Wyeth's face, but Aaron knew the man was raging inside.

"Been looking for you, Wyeth."

"So I see."

Eliza excused herself and returned to the party. The men watched her go.

"Nice gal," observed Aaron, watching Wyeth closely. "Make somebody a fair wife."

"Yes," Wyeth agreed. "I'm not only aware of that, but I'm going to be the husband."

"Congratulations. I figured you calculated along them lines."

"Which reminds me of my business with you."

"You said something about a proposition," Aaron said cautiously.

"Maybe. I think right off we ought to put our cards on the table. First of all, I'd like to know just what you're really doing in this part of the country. You're not an emigrant. You never were with the Bonney party. There's something fishy about you being stranded back there on the Trail."

"You're drawing the conclusions, Wyeth, but for the time being let them stand like that."

WYETH smirked. "That's what I thought. I ought to warn you that the commandant at Fort Hall is of an inherently suspicious nature. He has been known to hold suspicious travelers until they have been investigated, in military custody. He might want to know, for instance, why those animals died of exhaustion back there in the desert, when there was a waterhole nearby."

Aaron rubbed his jaw. "Well, I reckon I could've killed them to keep them from dying."

"Just the same, it might prove embarrassing. Do you understand, friend?"

"You might say I follow you, like a snake through a snowbank...but you said something about a proposition?"

"Your presence, I find, is becoming a bit contrary to my interests. If you were to disappear from the train soon, say at Fort Hall, and never be heard of in these parts again—personally, it doesn't matter to me what your secret business is. I've a very poor memory."

Aaron was grinning to himself by this time. "If you go on buying off all your competition with Eliza, Wyeth, you're going to be plumb broke by the time you get hitched to the gal."

Wyeth tensed visibly, but controlled himself. "I'd prefer we'd leave my motives out of this, Fitzpatrick. Do you deal, or not?"

"Well, now, that brings us around to my proposition. I can see you'd be a right good man to do business with. I've always had a hankering to have a go at trapping up in the Lost River country. I reckon I could be persuaded to go mighty easy—that is, if I could talk myself into some grub and pack animals."

Wyeth relaxed with a smile. "I knew you'd see it my way, friend. You're practically on your way now."

Wyeth turned and walked off. He stopped suddenly and said over his shoulder, "I hope your trapping turns out successful, friend."

"It will," prophesied Aaron. "There's plenty of fur where I'm going." He chuckled softly.

Aaron mingled with the settlers, stopping to talk with new friends occasionally. He caught a glimpse of Eliza dancing with Wyeth. He wondered what hidden purposes were behind the freighter's proposition; his methods were obvious. He found Johnny Prentiss presently and drew him off to one side.

"I been wanting to have a little talk with you, Johnny."

"Sure," said Johnny. "What about?"

"About you."

Johnny seemed disappointed. "Are you going to preach to me, too? Did my father put you up to this?"

"Whoa!" laughed Aaron. "Get a rein on that, Johnny. I'm no preacher. In fact I

gravitate quite a ways the other direction. Nope, this is my day for propositions. Kinda like bargain-day."

"I don't follow you, Aaron."

"Well, that ain't important. What I wanted to say is, I've had my eye on you since I joined this train. It's easy to see you don't hanker much for a settler's life."

"You're rubbing my sore boil, Aaron. All my life my father has kept me hog-tied at home, always telling me what to do, and when to do it. He stopped me from joining up during the war—we had a big fight over that, but he won out in the end, as usual. Then there was a party of miners going to the gold fields in California. I sneaked off that time without telling anyone, but dad found out and caught up with me in St. Louis. He made me come back—I wouldn't have, though, if mother hadn't been ill. Anybody'd think I didn't know how to take care of myself."

"You're big enough to know your own mind, Johnny. How come you didn't cut loose, once you were in Idaho Territory?"

"Well, for one thing, my father insisted I go all the way out to the Columbia with him, and I couldn't think of anything better to do. At least I'm seeing a little country. Dad was out there some years ago, and acquired some property along the river, near a portage I think. He built a tramway to haul freight and passengers around the rapids. Wyeth has been operating it for him, and now is trying to buy into it, but dad has held back so far because he wants to keep it in the family. I—well, what the hell would you do?"

"Probably the same as you, under the circumstances. But I've a venture in mind I thought might interest you. I need help, and you're the only one I can trust to go pards with me."

"You can trust me, Aaron. Count me in!" Johnny said, quickly.

"Wait a minute! I ain't even told you what it was yet."

"Yes, but I've got a hunch there'll be excitement in it."

Fitzpatrick told him about the cache of furs, but withheld any reference to its location. Johnny listened to Aaron as eagerly as Aaron himself had to George Baden.

"George Baden swore there was a hundred fifty thousand in fur cached there. And I knew George well enough to trust him. . . it seems that a couple of years ago a party of trappers was coming out of the mountains, after months of trapping, to meet the traders at their rendezvous. They had some trouble on the way with outlaw Blackfeet, but managed to escape long enough to cache the furs where they'd be safe until they could return for them later. Soon after this all the trappers were caught and massacred—except one. He got away on foot and wandered for months before reaching an outpost. He meant to go back for the fur as soon as he was strong enough, but, in the meantime, General Dodge located him and sent an urgent call to help the railroad engineers find a passable trail over a tough part of the Rockies. That's how I come to make his acquaintance. George Baden was the trapper that was able to get back alive. Now he's dead and I'm the only one that knows the location."

"Aaron," exclaimed Johnny, "I'm going with you if I have to crawl!"

"There's just one thing: can I trust you to keep this to yourself? I don't want anyone to know until we are on our way."

"You can trust me, pardner."

They shook hands on it.

IV

AARON KEPT OUT OF SIGHT AS much as possible when the wagon train reached Fort Hall. The whitewashed buildings of rammed earth and lodge poles were visible for many miles across the sparse plains. The sheds, storehouses and barracks were inside the stockade, which had two blockhouses on opposite corners. Near the river were the lodges of resident Indians and white squaw-men. The plains around the fort were crowded with *wickiups* and buffalo-hide *tepees,* covered with various designs and painted with bright vermilion from the northern caves. A platoon of cavalry was engaged daily in mock skirmishes around the base of a low hill.

Wyeth had promised to let Aaron have the horses and outfit when they reached Fort Hall, where the freighter had spare horses corraled this trip. Aaron had not talked to Eliza since the night of the party, and he supposed she was angry with him yet. Well, if she wanted to avoid him, it wouldn't hurt his feelings any. When

a woman had designs on a fellow it was best to pull stakes before he ended up behind a plow, grubbing for a meager living. Huh, not him! Besides, if Wyeth caught him being too friendly with Eliza he might cause trouble just when Aaron didn't want it.

He had plenty of company the last couple of days, however. Johnny Prentiss had attached himself to Aaron like a tick. He hoped that in his eagerness Johnny wouldn't tip their hand. It was a chance he had to take. Johnny was his protection. It wasn't hard to figure out Wyeth's deal. He planned to give Aaron the outfit, give him a start, and then claim Fitzpatrick had stolen his horses and send the soldiers after him. He'd be rid of Fitzpatrick and recover his animals too. But he wouldn't dare when he found out Johnny was with him. Wyeth had played right into his hands. Aaron chuckled to himself.

Aaron was taking his dun into the blacksmith shop to have him shod, but he had no sooner entered the dim, smoke-blackened interior when he heard someone shouting. "Well, bless my Saints, if it ain't young Fitzpatrick, himself!" said a voice that dripped with brogue.

AARON saw a redheaded man, standing by the forge, clad in leather apron, his face black with soot. "O'Timothy!" he cried. "You here in Fort Hall? I can't believe it. I thought I left all you Irish sons o' hell back on the railroad!"

"Did you now, Fitz? Well, I'll have ye know, me bucko, that here's a man that works at his trade, and it's proud I am of it. Now you—"

Fitzpatrick laughed and took an affectionate poke at the blacksmith's sweaty midriff. "I know, I know, you brawny mick! I'm a rip-roaring, no 'ccount, ring-tailed son of a rail-laying sidewinder, and if I had the brains the Lord put in little apples, I'd quit galivantin' among the heathen savages. I'd find myself a forge and earn my bread by the salt of my sweat, and proud I'd be of it!"

"Spoken like an Irish Lord, me bucko!"

O'Timothy showed Aaron where the tools were kept and helped him shoe the dun, keeping up a steady flow of Emerald Isle repartee all the while. When the horse was finished, Aaron took his leave promising to stop by when he returned to Fort Hall.

He had arranged with Wyeth to pick up the horses at the corral that night. He had instructed Johnny Prentiss to slip away and meet him at the river at that time. The moon was out when he reached the ford. As soon as Aaron found Johnny they crossed the river and struck out upstream in a northeasterly direction. He felt good for having put one over on Wyeth. When the freighter had seen him off, Aaron hadn't missed the cunning look on Wyeth's face.

Now that he was actually on his way he felt real regret for not having seen Eliza before he pulled out, but he reassured himself that he had been wiser not to.

They followed the river until dawn, when they stopped to cook breakfast. Aaron decided they should push on and travel only during the daylight hours until they cut the sign Aaron had memorized from George Baden's description. After the meal was over he told Johnny of the "deal" he had made with Wyeth.

"That bullwhacker sure hates competition," he grinned.

"Well, he's sure enough trying hard to get Eliza to marry him," said Johnny. "He's been courting her for more than a year. Sis can't seem to make up her mind. Dad thinks he'd make a good catch for her. For one thing, he's rich. Besides running freight wagons on the Oregon Road, he owns an interest in the Western Star Freight Company—that's an outfit that operates on the Columbia from Portland to the gold fields. He's been spending a helluva lot of money buying up right-of-way for a railroad too, so he must be doing pretty good in his business."

"If my guess is right, he'd sure enough frame me for stealing his horses. Funny a man would go that far just to get rid of a rival suitor, although, to tell you the honest truth, Johnny, my stock with Eliza had dropped mighty low."

Johnny snapped his fingers like he'd remembered something. "Doggone it, Aaron, I plumb forgot to give you a message. Reckon I was too excited over leaving."

"Message! From who?" Aaron grabbed his arm.

"Eliza couldn't find you yesterday, so she told me if I saw you that she wanted to

give you something. I'm darn sorry, Aaron. I reckon it's too late now."

"What was it, a locket?" Aaron felt a thrill sweep through him. But Johnny only looked puzzled.

"Darned if I know what it was."

"Why you doggone ornery catamount, I ought to make you ride back to Fort Hall. Doggone...well, it's too late now."

THEY followed the willow-banked river for twenty miles. To the north a high range of blue-gray peaks, splotched with white snowfields, rimmed the horizon. Aaron had cautioned Johnny to keep an eye out for a peculiar gap in the faraway mountains that resembled a swaybacked saddle. But Aaron himself was the first to see it.

"There she is, Johnny—the Devil's Saddle! Old George Baden was right. We've hit it right on the nose so far. All we got to do now is hightail it directly up into that pass."

Several days later the two weary travelers were high up in the pass. The going was tough through the pine and spruce and thick underbrush, until they cut a faint buffalo trail leading right up through the gap. There was plenty of Indian sign on the trail but so far they had not sighted another human being on the entire trip.

"We'll have to keep our eyes open, Johnny. I don't expect any Indian trouble but even though the troops have kept the Blackfeet pretty well subdued around here, there's still a chance of running into some renegades."

A fast, clear mountain stream poured down through the gap. It was the stream that interested Aaron most. He insisted on keeping close to it even if it meant fighting their way through dense willow and thorn thickets at times. At night they camped close to the water, extinguishing their campfire before dark.

On the second day about noon they came to a high, foaming cascade. Aaron scouted around to assure himself. "I think this is it, Johnny," he said finally.

"You mean the furs are cached around here?" Johnny asked eagerly.

"Looks like the place George Baden described to me. He said to look for the first big waterfall and, if this ain't the one, I'll swim up it backwards. You make camp and take care of the horses while I prowl around and see if I can locate a big cedar about four foot thick and surrounded by a thicket of serviceberries."

He spent the next two hours searching for that big cedar but with no success. His face and hands were scratched and bleeding from forcing his way through the underbrush, and his temper was on edge. He had started to retrace his steps when a series of shots rang out, the noise banging back and forth between the canyon walls.

The sudden shots jarred Aaron into quick action. He started on the run in the direction of the shots, checking his navy as he charged through the brush, cussing himself for not having brought the Spencer with him. He might have known the kid would get himself in trouble.

Ten minutes later he bull-dogged his way out of the woods into a bushy clearing near the creek. Johnny was standing in the opening holding his revolver in the air, preparing to fire again. He saw Aaron and dropped his arm.

"Johnny, what's the matter? Indians? You all right?"

"I'm fine! I'm perfect—!"

"Well, damn me for a horse thief! You mean to tell me you scared seventeen years of whisky drinking out of me, just for the fun of it? I ought to bullwhip your damn hide!"

"Listen, Aaron, I found the cache!"

Fitzpatrick gulped and tried to speak. Finally he motioned for Johnny to lead the way.

Against the tree and rising about twelve feet off the ground, a crude platform of lodge poles had been built. A box-like shelter of three inch logs sat on the platform, and inside, carefully packed in a nest of spruce boughs, bound with buffalo skin and bullhide thongs, were several large bundles of fur.

V

SLOWLY THE TWO MEN trailed back across the vast, sunburned prairie toward the winding Snake. The distant emerald slash in the wasteland loomed up invitingly. When they reached the river they rested long enough to water their heavily-laden horses and then pushed on impatiently.

Johnny's elation over their good fortune was not shared fully by Aaron. George Baden must have been mistaken about the value of the cache. The furs, which included mink, beaver, marten and fox, were on the whole in good condition, although there were some skins which had been fleshed carelessly and showed decay. But he estimated their value at only twenty thousand, considerably less than his expectations. At that, it was a small fortune; yet, now that they had it, he was inwardly puzzled over his lack of enthusiasm. He told himself he was just disappointed over the value of the cache.

"What are you going to do with your share?" Johnny asked.

"Danged if I can make up my mind, Johnny. Now that we got the fur, I'm all mixed up."

"Me, I'm going to do some traveling. I want to see New York and New Orleans, maybe I'll even go to Europe. I'm going to make up for all I've missed!"

"Well, it's none of my business of course, but a few thousand ain't going to last long at that rate. Don't you think it would be wiser if you invested it—say, in your father's business?"

"Hell no! Why should I? I'm on my own now. Besides, it's just a matter of time before the railroad builds along the Columbia and buys out father. Why throw good money into a future like that? I'm on my own and I'm going to stay that way, thanks to you."

"Yeah, thanks to me," muttered Aaron.

Johnny motioned suddenly. "Look!"

THREE bare-backed riders were coming through the willows a hundred yards ahead of them.

"Indians!" hissed Aaron. "I don't like their looks. Keep your guns handy. There's only three of them and they won't attack unless they get the drop." Aaron's own navy was loaded and ready in his waistband. He checked his Spencer carbine and held it in his lap.

The three Indians approached cautiously. Aaron halter the horses and waited calmly for them to make the first move. "They're Blackfeet," Aaron whispered. "Look how they're dressed."

The Blackfeet were clothed in a scant girdle around the waist, and a tattered and grimy buffalo robe over the shoulders. Their heads were shaven, except for a ridge down the center of their scalps like the bristles on a hyena. Fitzpatrick knew that most of the friendly Indians along the Road had adopted the white man's clothes whenever possible. These Blackfeet could only be renegades.

The Indians halted a short distance from the pack train. Aaron swung the barrel of the Spencer around until the muzzle was pointed directly at the leader, who was holding up his hand.

"What do you want?" Aaron spoke first.

"You got food?" asked the leader. "Me Little Joseph." The eyes of the savages were wandering over the pack-laden horses.

"I reckon he thinks his name should scare us," whispered Aaron out of the corner of his mouth. "Keep your gun handy."

Aaron shook his head emphatically. "No food." He rubbed his belly significantly, then repeated, "no food."

An angry look appeared on Little Joseph's face. He grunted and started for the two men. Aaron raised his gun immediately and pulled back on the hammer. The Indian checked himself abruptly at the sight of the large bore staring him in the face. He retreated cautiously and motioned for his companions. The three babbled in their native tongue for a moment, Little Joseph punctuating his speech with violent gestures; then the three whirled and rode off at a gallop without another word.

"Whew!" sighed Johnny. "That was a close shave! You sure bluffed them."

"They weren't after food. Did you see how they kept looking at our pack horses. I wonder if meeting them here was just a coincidence? We'll have to keep our eyes peeled, Johnny, especially on the back trail. I don't trust them renegades as far as I can throw a buffalo by the tail."

"Hell, I bet they don't stop running this side of Montana!"

"You don't know Indians like I do, Johnny," said Aaron.

The two reached the Portneuf River without incident, however. This would be their last camp. Fort Hall was not far away. The country around here was patrolled regularly by troops from the fort. At Fort Hall they could secure a wagon and

freight the furs to Salt Lake, where they could connect with the railroad. From there they could go to Saint Joseph to dispose of the furs at auction. As Aaron thought this out he was aware of a growing dissatisfaction. Something was wrong; there was something missing in the plan.

"Johnny," he said suddenly, "I wonder where the wagon train is now?"

"You mean my father's party? They can't be far down river. They figured a week or more at Fort Hall for repairs and a rest. The oxen were pretty well exhausted. Why?"

Aaron did some rapid mental figuring, feeling a growing sense of excitement. The Road followed the river here all the way to Three Island Crossing. At their two-mile-an-hour gait the party couldn't be far down stream.

"Johnny," Aaron announced, "I'm going to make a little side trip."

"Not me! I'm not going back to the wagon train, if that's what you mean. I've got no business there now."

"No, not you," Aaron explained. "You take the fur to Fort Hall alone. There's no danger now; we're too close to the fort. You should make it by noon tomorrow. Secure a wagon and wait for me there. I got some unfinished business to attend to. If you need any help there, see the blacksmith, O'Timothy. He's a friend of mine."

"Uh-huh. You're not fooling me at all. My little sister finally got her hooks into you. And I thought you were the big ladies' man!"

"Who said anything about that?" snapped Aaron. "I could have other business with the party."

"Yes," grinned Johnny, "but you ain't!"

"Well," Aaron grudgingly admitted, "I never did like to leave loose ends dangling. Besides, you said yourself Eliza wanted to give me something. If I'm leaving the country, it's my business if I want something to remember her by."

"Sure, sure," grinned Johnny.

CARRIED along by the swift current of the Snake, Aaron's crude raft rapidly lessened the distance between himself and the wagon train. He had left his dun with Johnny and taken to the river as a swifter means of travel. Traveling light, he carried only his guns and a sack of grub. His raft consisted of two logs lashed together with bullhide. The unwieldy craft was unsuitable for fast water, but he hoped to catch up with the Prentiss party before he reached any rapids. He was able to control the raft somewhat by poling.

He wondered if he were trying to fool himself, as to his motives. He could not get the thought of the girl with the straw-colored hair out of his mind, and he dared hope—else why had she wanted to see him? Jason Wyeth notwithstanding, he had to see her again; let the future take care of itself.

Mulling this over in his mind, he failed to notice the channel ahead twisting and changing. The hump of a wet boulder split the river, leaving a wake of foaming white water. Toward this obstruction, his raft hurtled with the speed of a wild pony.

Too late, Aaron saw the danger. He poled frantically, but the increased strength of the current caught his pole and wrenched it away. There was a heavy thud, a grinding of logs against an immovable object, and then the bullhide parted and the raft dissolved into a maelstrom of logs, arms and legs, and precious supplies lost to the river forever.

Aaron bobbed up to the surface far downstream, gasping for breath and half-drowned. He could swim, but did not try to buck the powerful current, letting it carry him along while he steered himself toward the left bank. When he was close to shore he caught the branches of an overhanging willow and pulled himself exhausted to the safety of the mossy bank.

After he had rested, he found the wagon ruts along the river and followed them westward. His clothes dried on him quickly as he pushed along, hungry and tired and cursing his bad luck in losing his guns along with his food.

The sun was a red ball on the horizon when he heard the sound of fast-moving hoofs. He made out a rider coming from the direction of Fort Hall at a full gallop, churning up the dust of the road in a billowing wake behind him. The rider was bent low in the saddle and pushing his horse at a pace that bespoke an emergency. No horseman would push an animal like that unless it was a matter of life or death.

Aaron stepped off to one side as the

rider approached. The horseman rode close by but did not slow down, merely waving as he rode past. The man shouted something Aaron could not make out; then he was gone and in a moment swallowed up in the distance.

The strange horseman must have been on a mission of the greatest importance to pass up a fellow stranded on the plains, Aaron thought. He wondered if the Indians were stirred up, but it didn't seem likely with the presence of the strong garrison at Fort Hall.

It was nearing midnight when, footsore and low in spirit, he spotted the campfires of the wagon train ahead. In the reflected glow of the fires the canvas-topped wagons were visible, pulled up in the familiar circle for the night. With quickened steps he hastened to the camp.

He knew as soon as he stepped inside the circle of wagons that something was in the air. The entire camp had gathered, and there were angry shouts and a confusion of voices. He saw Eliza in the arms of another woman. Ezra Prentiss was standing close to a fire, motionless as a rock, his hands clasped behind him, his face grim and ashen in the flickering light, oblivious to the confusion around him.

Aaron approached the gathering, bewildered but sensing disaster. He heard his name shouted, and saw Jason Wyeth pointing at him. "There he is—grab him!" Then he was surrounded and angry arms clutched him. Blows were rained on him. Through the confusion he heard Eliza cry out; then in terror she fled to her wagon. Prentiss came to life and, clenching his fists in anger, he started for Fitzpatrick.

"Wait a minute!" Aaron shouted. "What the hell's going on here? Get your damn paws off me!"

"You had plenty of guts to show up here!" Wyeth grated. "Were you stupid enough to think you could murder Johnny Prentiss under the very noses of the Army at Fort Hall and get away with it?"

"Murder? What are you talking about? When I left Johnny he was just as much alive as you are, maybe more so."

"You've forgotten that kind of news travels fast, Fitzpatrick. One of my men just rode out from Fort Hall. They just found Johnny. He was murdered by you, not ten miles from the fort."

VI

AARON WAS CRAMPED AND numb, and he had not slept all night. He lay in the back of a wagon, securely bound hand and foot with rawhide thongs. His body was stiff and sore, and numb from the lack of circulation. His face ached from numerous bruises. The irate pioneers had not been too gentle with him, least of all Prentiss, who had fallen upon him with the savage fury of a griefstricken man.

At long last, when some measure of sanity had been restored to the mob, they had bound him up and left him in the wagon to await the morning, when they should decide what to do with him.

Prentiss, himself, when he had become rational again, had dispatched a rider to Fort Hall to notify the soldiers to take custody of him. In the meantime, however, Fitzpatrick had heard the ominous warnings of agitation among the men. An excited voice here and there drifted to his ears, mingled with sounds of activity. He could guess that this was Wyeth's final revenge. Perhaps even now a tripod of wagon tongues was being erected. He had slight hope of escaping a lynching.

Wyeth had carefully twisted the circumstances to point to his guilt, until there was no doubt in everyone's mind that he had actually killed Johnny. The death of Johnny saddened Aaron. He had liked the kid, and a good deal of his sorrow was remorse for placing Johnny in that position.

There could be only one explanation. The renegade Blackfeet must have trailed them, waiting for a chance to attack, and when Aaron had left Johnny they had boldly waylaid him almost within sight of the fort.

The rider had said there was no sign of Indian treachery. Besides the Indians in the vicinity were docile and friendly. No, Johnny had been shot in the back, and left on the prairie with his dead horse beside him. The pack horses had left a trail to the river and there all trace of them had disappeared. Aaron had persuaded Johnny to leave the wagon train, hadn't he? He had been the last one to see him alive. He had used Johnny for his own nefarious purposes and then disposed of him. Before passing out, Johnny had man-

aged to scratch Aaron's name in the sand, thus furnishing a clue to the guilty one.

Aaron heard a movement in front of the wagon. He twisted around and his blood beat faster when he saw it was Eliza. Her eyes were red from crying.

"I thought you might be thirsty," she explained, "so I brought you some water"

"Eliza! I've wanted to talk to you. You've got to believe me when I tell you that I don't know anything about Johnny's death. Oh, I realize I was a fool to use Johnny in my plan to beat Wyeth's game, but—"

"I don't want to hear about it, Aaron. You shouldn't have come here. The men—they're stirred up—"

"Eliza, look at me. I tell you I didn't kill Johnny! They can hang me if that's what they want, but I've got to know you believe me—"

"Oh, Aaron, I don't know what to think. They seem so sure and the evidence—"

"Wyeth is just twisting things around to point the blame at me. He wants me out of the way. Can't you see that? I had no reason to kill Johnny. I liked him." He told her about finding the cache and meeting the Indians. "It must have been those Blackfeet. I could kick myself for leaving Johnny alone, but we were so close to the fort I thought it would be safe. All I could think about was catching up with the train and seeing you again. You—you did tell Johnny you wanted to give me something, didn't you?"

Eliza sighed limply, and her tear-soiled face softened. "Yes, Aaron," she said softly. "I—I guess I knew all along you couldn't have done that to Johnny, but everyone seemed so sure—"

"Listen, Eliza, I've got to get loose from here and get to the bottom of this."

"No, I can't let you go. It would only prove to the men that you were guilty. If they caught you again they — they wouldn't give you a chance! I'll go to father and explain—"

"There isn't time for that. Those men out there are fixing for a necktie party, and are in no mood to listen. Wyeth is seeing to that."

"Please, Aaron. I know father can stop them. They'll listen to him. I can't let you go. If you escaped, they would be convinced you were guilty."

Aaron sank back in resignation. He was not convinced that Prentiss could overcome Wyeth's insistent agitation. "All right, Eliza," he said. "I'll take that drink now." She knelt beside him and lifted the tin cup to his lips. He grimaced with pain in his cramped position. "Couldn't you just loosen these ropes for a minute. I've been lying like this all night."

Eliza nodded. She set the cup down and untied the knots in the rawhide. He flexed his wrists to get the circulation started and loosened the thongs around his ankles. She didn't seem to notice that he was completely free of his bonds. "Believe me, I hate to do this, darling," he said. Suddenly he jumped up and vaulted out the back of the wagon. He hesitated, then grabbed the girl and kissed her hurriedly. Then he was gone. Eliza stared after him in surprise, not daring to shout to warn the men and not daring not to.

Aaron circled the wagons to the horse corral. One of the men was currying a horse, but seemed intent on his work. A couple of horses stood nearby, saddled and ground-reined.

Nervously, Aaron selected the black and sidled up to it cautiously. He was about to mount when he heard the man cry out. He tried to get into the saddle but the man was upon him too quickly, grabbing his leg and yelling frantically.

AARON fell, taking the man to the ground with him. The settler was game. He was determined to hold Aaron until help arrived. Aaron lashed out with his fists, twisting and turning to shake the man, a wild-eyed leech, screaming for the rest of the men.

Aaron brought his knee into the other's chin and broke the man's hold on his leg, but the man bounced back like a bear dog, trying for a blow to Aaron's chin. Aaron slipped the fist off the side of his face, throwing a right in an upward blow to the pioneer's broad jaw. The man grunted and his head snapped back. Aaron could hear the shouts of the other men now, coming fast from all directions. He could see flashes of homespuns closing in. Desperately, he threw himself in the saddle, and was almost jerked off again as his assailant attempted to clutch his leg once more. Aaron finally managed to free him-

self of his leech by raking his heel across the man's face. Other hands sought a hold on him, but the dancing black saved him for the moment. He jerked the frightened horse into the nearest man, knocking him to the ground.

Kicking the mount into action, he rode in among the other excited horses, shouting and waving his arms. The animals began milling, and then in fright stampeded out of the flimsy enclosure, which consisted only of a bullhide rope, flagged at intervals with red bandannas.

Guns roared behind him and the air was alive with whistling missiles. He could hear the curses of the frustrated pursuers at finding the available horses scattered. Something whacked him in the back of the arm with a heavy blow. His arm went numb immediately. He switched the reins to the other hand, as he felt the warm, moist blood seep out of the wound and soak his shirt. It didn't pain now, but would give him trouble as soon as the shock wore off.

He had the lead he needed. Bending low in the saddle, he fanned the black back down the wagon road toward Fort Hall.

AARON approached Fort Hall from the direction of the river, wending his way casually among the *wickiups* and Indian lodges. Leaving his horse tied to a willow, he followed close behind two rough-clad plainsmen who were entering the stockade. Once inside, he made his way quickly to the blacksmith shop. He needed information mainly, but right now there was a pressing need for antiseptic and bandages for his arm. Fortunately, it was a clean wound.

O'Timothy was alone, and he was surprised to see Fitzpatrick. "Fitz, you fool hellion, what're ye doing here? I swear, half the garrison be out looking for ye."

"Quick!" Aaron said to the case-hardened redhead. "Have you got a place we can be alone?"

"Sure, Fitz." The blacksmith led the way to a lean-to at the rear of the shop, which served as a home and a place to store his liquor supply. "Now tell me, lad, what brand o' the divil made ye bushwack that poor boy?"

"Dammit all, O'Timothy, I didn't kill him!"

"That I'm glad to hear. But what's it all about, thin?"

"I don't know yet but I intend to find out, pronto, or get my neck stretched in the attempt." He told the redhead about the renegade Indians that must have trailed him; and leaving Johnny while he went downstream after the wagon trail; how the pioneers, inspired by Wyeth, had captured him, and his subsequent escape.

"Golly be! Ye couldn't be worse off if ye had three wives and no plow."

"You got to help me, O'Timothy."

"Sure, lad, but what kin I do?"

"I got to have a place to hide for the time being. Then I want to find out all I can about Jason Wyeth. He's behind this somewhere. I'm sure of it, although I don't see the connection. Now if I could only find them Indians, I'd make them talk, if I had to scalp 'em hair by hair. But all I know about them is they don't dress like the Indians around here, and one of them said his name was Little Joseph. Do you know anything about them?"

"No, but come to think of it, Fitz, I recall seeing this Wyeth talking to a couple of Indians over by the warehouse, the day after you left here. But I sure don't recollect what they looked like. The heathens all look alike to me."

"Were they wearing buffalo skins and were their heads shaved?"

O'Timothy scratched his head. "That I cannot recall, lad."

"Can you tell me anything about Wyeth? He runs his wagons through here regular, don't he?"

"Yes, he's no stranger 'round here, but thats about all I know about him. There is some gossip, though, that he be buying up all that railroad rightaway for someone besides himself—"

"Hell, what are you talking about?"

"Maybe ye didn't know, but that bucko has been buying rightaway, supposedly for his own interests for two years. Damn me, if I know where he gets all the money. Gossip says he's just acting for some railroad financiers back East, who don't want their competition to get a smell o' their plans."

"All of which is clear as mud in a frog pond," said Aaron. "Where is this railroad supposed to build?"

"There's talk, me lad, that it will fol-

low the Columbia to Wallula and cross over this way. Maybe connect with the rails in Utah. There's been no talk of Government land grants yet, so it remains to be seen."

"Well, all that don't help me much except that he's spending more money than his freight business pays him. I reckon I'll ride down to the Snake and try to cut some sign of them damn renegades."

"Take care, Fitz, the troopers be looking for ye high and wide. And your neck be green enough to stretch easy."

O'Timothy had bandaged Aaron's wound and supplied him with ammunition, grub and guns. Now he made his way unobserved to the river where his black was tethered. A group of cavalry had just left the fort, probably to relieve the troopers searching for him. He decided his safest bet was to follow the trail of the soldiers as far as the ford. The last place they'd likely look for him would be on their back trail.

He cut their tracks not far from the fort and followed at an easy gait. The trail led toward the ford where he had last left Johnny Prentiss. That would be as good a place as any to begin his search.

He noticed an Indian approaching nearby on his way to the fort. He was riding a horse and pulling a *travois* behind, in typical mission Indian fashion. Fitzpatrick would not ordinarily have given it another thought. But something about the scene struck a chord in his memory. He reined in and stared at the Indian, who was passing a few yards away. What was it that had attracted his attention? Then he realized in a flash that it was the horse and not the Indian. It was his dun, the one he'd saved from dying in the desert! He had left the animal with Johnny when he took to the river. Still, he might be wrong.

He whistled sharply to see what would happen. At once the dun pricked up its ears and turned its head. When it caught Aaron's scent the horse whinnied and swung around in his direction. The Indian tried to stop the animal but the dun ignored the rider and made for Aaron.

Aaron closed up the distance between himself and the redskin, keeping his gun handy. Suddenly the Indian jerked out

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an ancient rifle and fired wildly in Aaron's direction. Then he dropped the gun, jumped off the horse and ran frantically off across the plains. Fitzpatrick caught up with the frightened redskin easily. He dropped on the Indian's shoulders and smashed him to the ground.

The Indian put up a frenzied fight. He was slippery as an eel and fought like a panther. Fitzpatrick's face bled from a dozen fingernail scratches and he ached in the groin from the kicking feet of the redskin. He twisted suddenly and grabbed the Indian's hand. It held a bone-handled knife. He pinned the arm under his foot and lashed out with a left that ricocheted off the bone in the Indian's cheek. Aaron felt him go limp. "Try your tricks on me, will you!" he panted. "I should give you the same medicine Johnny got and lift your hair to boot!"

VII

AARON CAME AT LAST IN sight of the wagon train, which was still camped in the same spot along the river. He rode his dun-colored horse, a Colt's in his waistband and a carbine across his saddle. A couple of paces ahead of his horse, the black he'd stolen from the emigrants was leading the way. A Blackfoot Indian was mounted on the black, meek and subdued, his shaved head, with the ridge of hyena bristles down the center, bowed in subjection. A greasy buffalo robe covered his slumping back. His hands were tied with bullhide thongs, and a rope was looped around his neck, leading back to the saddlehorn on the dun.

Aaron approached the camp with some misgivings. He wasn't sure his bluff would work, but it was the only course open to him.

He noticed some activity about the camp, and the familiar blue uniforms of the troopers. His muscles tensed with anticipation. If he failed, he knew he was walking into a gallows. Boldly he marched his prisoner into camp.

Instantly the entire gathering was aroused. In a moment he was surrounded by shouting men. Wyeth was there, his face revealing some satisfaction mingled with apprehension at the sight of the captive Indian. He was standing with Prentiss, who looked older and more careworn than ever. Eliza had climbed up on a wagon box to get a better view. One anguished hand was at her throat.

Second Lieutenant Pearson of the troopers took charge of the situation.

"Is your name Aaron Fitzpatrick?"

"Correct, Lieutenant and, I might add, recently discharged from the Union Army where I served under General Dodge." He watched the officer's face, and was rewarded with a quickening of interest and a passing look of approval.

"It is my duty to arrest you for the alleged murder of Johnny Prentiss, Fitzpatrick," the officer announced.

Aaron held up his hand. "If you'll all just give me a chance, I'll prove to you that I didn't murder Johnny." He waited while the scrambled confusion of voices died down. He noticed the look of relief on Eliza's face. Encouraged, he went on. "You'll notice I didn't come here alone—in fact, I wouldn't have come here at all if I was guilty. But I was doing a little snooping on my own when I ran into some startling facts. This here Blackfoot is my proof of innocence." The Indian remained motionless in stoic silence.

Jason Wyeth stared at Fitzpatrick with narrowed eyes. Aaron kept himself on the alert for any sudden moves.

"This here Indian will tell you that he and two others were set on our trail when Johnny and I went out after that cache of fur. We were well armed and I reckon they were afraid to jump us until I left Johnny at the Portneuf and rafted down to catch up with the wagon train. They caught Johnny alone near the fort after following our trail, just waiting for a chance to bushwack us. They murdered Johnny and made off with our pack horses and fur. I had left this horse I'm riding with Johnny. When I caught this here Indian with it I knew he was one of the bushwackers. After a little persuasion, he owned up to it and put the blame on the man who's behind it all—a white man."

"Are you sure of this, Fitzpatrick? That is a mighty serious charge."

"Of course, I'm sure! Just ask the Indian who put him up to it."

Jason Wyeth strode forward quickly. "All this is ridiculous, Lieutenant. Fitzpatrick has cooked this all up. What about

the fact that Johnny, with his dying strength, scratched the name of 'Aaron Fitzpatrick' in the sand? That alone proves that Johnny was pointing out the killer with his last strength."

"That don't prove anything. What is more likely, Johnny was trying to leave a message to me and only had enough strength left to write my name."

"That's absurd! Why would he do that?"

Aaron saw Prentiss standing quietly near them, his face grim and gray as granite. Eliza had dropped weakly to the seat of the wagon, her shoulders shaking.

"The fact is, Wyeth," said Aaron, "This here Indian will point to you as the polecat behind Johnny's murder!"

"Why you—!" Wyeth sprang at Fitzpatrick and dragged him from the saddle. The carbine fell harmlessly to the ground. He went down in a tangle of limbs, landing on the back of his neck. He was stunned for a moment, but did not relax his grip on Wyeth. The stocky freighter tried to pin him to the ground, his thick fingers seeking Aaron's throat. The two men rolled over and over in the dust.

Aaron suddenly found himself on the bottom and strong fingers clamped like a vise over his windpipe. Struggling savagely, he brought his knee to Wyeth's groin and felt a satisfaction as the larger man groaned in pain. He slipped out from Wyeth's grasp and got to his feet. The freighter spun around like a puma, watching for an opening. Aaron swung his right squarely into the freighter's jaw, swinging the weight of his body into the blow. Wyeth grunted and the blood spurted from cracks in his lips. He seemed paralyzed where he stood. Aaron moved in again, more surely this time, and swung once more. Wyeth dropped back into the dust.

WILLING hands helped Aaron steady himself. His breath came in lung-bursting gulps; his face was streaked with blood. He brushed the dirt off himself and tucked his homespun shirt back into his pants. Blood had begun to ooze out of the old wound in his arm, and pain crawled up the muscle to his shoulder.

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Eliza pushed through the crowd. Someone brought a pail of refreshing water. He wiped the dirty blood and grime from his face and splashed the rest of the water on Wyeth, who was coming around.

Lieutenant Pearson immediately dispatched a runner to Fort Hall to send out searching parties for the renegade Blackfeet from the description Aaron gave him. He ordered Sergeant Benton to take Wyeth into custody.

"Do you wish to deny these charges, Wyeth?"

Wyeth shook his head stubbornly. He had nothing to say to the Army. He walked over to Eliza. "I want you to know how sorry I am it turned out this way," he said. "I had no idea any harm would come to Johnny . . . I thought I had an understanding with Little Joseph. I—I just wanted Fitzpatrick out of the way. I was horrified to learn Johnny had been killed. I hope that some day you'll—forgive me a little—"

Eliza dropped her head in her hands and fled through the crowd. The pain on her face knifed through Aaron's soul.

"But why? Why, Jason?" Prentiss asked. "It all seems so senseless."

"I can just about guess," put in Aaron. "Wyeth thought I was a Union Pacific man come to spy out his activities. It all ties in. He was a front for Eastern railroad interests, who planned to secure land grants for a railroad venture. The money he's been splurging on buying land from the settled districts was supplied by his backers. Most of this land was along the Columbia. Johnny told me before he was killed that you had let Wyeth manage your affairs while you were in the East getting up a party. My guess it, Wyeth represented your interests as his own and paid himself a more than tidy sum for the right-of-way over it, hoping to cover up some way before you found out, or before the construction crews started pushing rails over your property. Undoubtedly he tried to buy into your interests for practically nothing, figuring when he and—"

AARON left the sentence dangling rather than bring Eliza into it. Anyway, it didn't matter now what various means he used to gain his ends.

"It sounds so unbelievable . . ." Prentiss shook his head slowly, trying to comprehend, as if his inherent faith in men were shaken. "I can't understand it."

Wyeth had been edging away almost imperceptibly, while the stunned crowd listened to the startling revelations. Before anyone was aware, the frieghter had leaped onto Aaron's dun and savagely kicked the horse into motion. The spooked animal charged through the crowd, spilling people right and left, and in a matter of seconds was in the clear. Aaron watched unconcerned as a long tail of dust rose up behind the fleeing man, the distance between them widening rapidly.

Pearson motioned to Benton with a curt wave of his arm, but the sergeant was already in action, and soon the troopers were in hot pursuit.

Fitzpatrick heard a familiar chuckle behind him, and even as he turned he grinned to himself. The Indian, who up to now, bound to his horse, had been stoically oblivious to events, was beginning to show signs of life.

Rye whisky, rye whisky, rye whisky, I cry,
If you don't give me rye whisky, I surely will die.

"Shut up, you damn fool!" Fitzpatrick grated. "Do you want to shame the Irish race?"

A closer look revealed a trace of red showing under hair that had been blackened with soot from a blacksmith's forge, and this same Indian dressed in white man's clothes and a scorched leather apron could easily pass for an Irishman by the name of O'Timothy.

"I thought there was something funny about that Indian," a voice said in Aaron's ear. "What happened to the real one—if there was one?"

Aaron turned to see Pearson grinning at him. "I caught the real one near the fort. He had my horse. It turned out, though, he'd traded his best squaw for the pony, and couldn't or wouldn't remember to whom. He seemed innocent of the whole thing and plumb scared to death. It put an idea in my head, though, and since I couldn't trust the Indian to act out the part, I prevailed upon O'Timothy here."

"The Irish always been a hammy race," chuckled O'Timothy. "I wonder now, would these here squatters be having a small drop o' whisky about?"

THE young man on the dun-colored horse paused on a swale and squinted his eyes at the vast purplish-gray sage and lava land that stretched ahead one hundred and twenty miles to the headwaters of the Humbolt River, gateway to the goldfields of northern California. He lifted a burlap-covered canteen to his dry lips and drank economically of the tepid water. He had a long way to go.

A long way to go—and ahead lay a kaleidescope of excitement and new adventures. He told himself he should feel elated at the prospect, but the fact of the matter was this gloomy depression had clung to him like the hair on a pig every since he had taken silent leave of the Prentiss party at the California Cut-off. He hadn't even said goodbye to Eliza, with her corn-tassled hair and supple hips —not skinny, but built nice so a man had something to grab onto. He remembered her moist lips that looked inviting in the flickering light of a campfire, and her voice that chided, yet made one feel that he was the one and only. He hadn't fooled her at all with that rip-roarin' talk about the gals he'd left in the States. Then suddenly he wished he could remember more about her; little details about her came popping up and flitting away again before he could feast his mind upon them.

He kept telling himself he hadn't sneaked out like a coyote in a hen yard. He was being—well, noble—in a way. It was much better like this. He was a bucko that had to have action. He was bad for the Prentisses. He was just not their kind of sodbuster. For them, everything he touched turned to grief.

He twisted in the saddle then and gazed back along the rutted prairie, as if he could see the slow-moving wagons of the Prentiss party, miles away, wending their way along the river toward the Blue Mountains and the Columbia. Even as he looked he saw a powdery speck in the distance, its movement catching his eye, appearing and disappearing in a ravine, or dodging around a lava ridge. The speck

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grew larger and became a dust cloud trailing its kitetail behind. A lone horseman burning up the distance, pushing the animal without thought of good horseflesh.

Fitzpatrick checked the loads in his Colt's and stuck it back into his waistband. He unlimbered the Spencer carbine and prepared himself. He looked about him for some cover, but there was none. The scene was all too familiar and all too inevitable. This time, he'd remember to save the canteen at any cost.

He waited motionless, sanguinely, wondering if it were Araphoes or Blackfeet this time. The dust cloud grew and grew and the lone rider began to take form, bent low behind the neck of a hammer-headed black. There was something familiar in the way the rider sat in the saddle. A strange thought possessed him and he slowly shook his head in disbelief. At the same time his thumb slowly left the hammer of the carbine, and the muzzle lowered.

The rider pulled up the foaming black a few feet from Aaron and Eliza Prentiss looked at him for a moment across the intervening distance, panting a little, and her full-flowered breasts rising and falling under her homespun, masculine shirt.

"Hello, Aaron," she said. "You forgot my locket again."

"Hello, Eliza. You shouldn't have followed me."

"You were running away? Leaving me without a word?"

"You shouldn't have left the wagon train. It ain't safe out here alone."

"Answer my question!"

Aaron's eyes darted away from her's but returned and he couldn't tear them away. "It's better this way, believe me," he said.

"So you are making up your mind for both of us? Don't I have anything to say about it?"

Aaron shook his head. "You want a fellow, who'll clear your land and break sod for you, and build a cabin you can call home—who'll aways be around when you need him. You know I'm not that kind. You're a girl that needs a good dependable husband."

"I don't want *a* husband. I want you!"

"Eliza—"

"Aaron Fitzpatrick, are you coming back or not?"

"No."

"All right then, I'm staying with you."

"You can't do that, you doggone little fool. Think of your father. You're the only one he has left now. It wouldn't be right."

Eliza folded her arms across her breasts stubbornly. "I'm staying with you."

Aaron looked at her in silence.

"Yes—yes, sure you are," he said at last. "But I'm heading back to the wagon train!"

The young man and the girl with the corn-tasseled hair started back toward the river again, their legs touching as the horses walked side by side. She leaned toward him and rested her hand on the cantle of his rig, smiling at him in that chiding way of hers.

"Didn't you know you couldn't bluff me, Aaron. I knew all along you just wanted to be coaxed!"

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